

Final report for studying abroad in the academic year 2022/2023

After spending two semesters at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan, I can look back on a year full of valuable experience and growth.

1. Academics

1.1 Study in Kansai Program

Enrolling into the SKP (Study in Kansai Program) at the Ritsumeikan University leaves one with the choice to choose one out of three different profiles. The "Intensive Japanese Language" track (IJL), the "Regular Courses in English" track (RCE) and the "Regular Courses in Japanese" track (RCJ). As for the latter, you need to have a high proficiency in Japanese, a JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) level N1 or equivalent. I personally have not met anyone enrolled in the RCJ, so there is not much I can say about it.

Even though I am enrolled in the IJL track, I want to explain a bit about the RCE track first. In the RCE track you can choose courses from a list provided at the start of the semester. All the courses are in English, taken by both international and Japanese students. As far as I know most of them have presentation and reports as their examination methods. The workload may vary depending on the course, but generally it is rather moderate compared to the IJL, and thus RCE students usually have more free time at hand to explore the city or go on trips. There are also many students who adjusted their schedule in a way that they have a 3-day or 4-day weekend.

In contrast, the IJL track has a high workload, and it is more difficult to make some free time for weekend trips. In IJL, you are given a schedule and usually you will have classes

five days a week of which you will have three days with two classes, and two days with one class. There will be homework every day, such as preparing the vocabulary, grammar, texts, or exercises in the textbook. Depending on the level you are in there will be test every or every two weeks. Additionally, there will be presentations and written assignments. Thus, IJL students are usually rather busy. However, it also depends on whether you take any additional courses from the RCE track, how serious you take your studies, and maybe on your previous Japanese skills. Actually, IJL students can skip quite a few classes without failing the course, but teachers discourage students to do so. However, given the high workload I think skipping a class or two a justified method to take break when needed.

In summary, if you want to focus on improving your Japanese IJL is of course the way to go but be prepared to spend a lot of time studying. On the other hand, if you rather want to enjoy your stay and have some more free time at hand then RCE would be my recommendation.

1.2 My personal evaluation on the Intensive Japanese Language track (IJL)

As for the teachers, they are generally nice, with some being a bit stricter than others, but of course they all expect you to do your homework and prepare for the lesson. Thus, as I mentioned above, the workload in IJL is high, and right now I feel like I am just studying for the tests instead of for myself. That is because given the high pace of the course, it is difficult to repeat the old vocabulary while keeping up with the new one and the homework, grammar, etc. Thus, me and my classmates were usually really stressed out at some point during the semester, especially towards the end.

Nevertheless, I can tell that my Japanese skills improved immensely during my stay at Ritsumeikan, and I would say it is worth it.

1.3 Campuses

As you might be aware of, there are three campuses at Ritsumeikan University, Kinugasa Campus in Kyoto (KIC, which is where the IJL is located), Biwako- Kusatsu Campus in Shiga (BKC) and Osaka Ibaraki Campus in Osaka (OIC). Depending on the track and courses you choose you will be on different campuses. OIC is directly located at a train station, but KIC and BKC have to be reached by bus. In between the campuses there are shuttle busses operating from the afternoon, they take roughly an hour to one and a half hours between two campuses and cost 150¥ (roughly 1€).

I have every only taken courses on KIC, but I do take the shuttle bus one a week to go to BKC. It is a very easy way to commute between the campuses and you can do homework, sleep, or eat in the bus as well.

2. Personal experience

First of all, I really enjoyed my stay at Ritsumeikan. I made many international friends (mostly from my class or my dormitory) and it was a pleasant experience to explore Kyoto, or other places in Japan together or to just to share our struggles when it comes to learning Japanese.

2.1. Club activities

Besides my international friends I was also lucky to make some Japanese friends as well. Mainly because I joined one of the many clubs they have at Ritsumeikan university. At

the beginning of the semester we were handed out a booklet that lists all the clubs at Ritsumeikan, also with some hints on how welcoming they are to exchange students joining. (You should be aware that a lot of Japanese students have a low proficiency in English and thus some clubs might be reluctant to accept foreign students that do not speak Japanese, but generally speaking they are rather welcoming.) The clubs are separated by fields (sports, arts, etc.) and by whether they are a club (more serious about their club activities) and circles (more leisurely clubs). To join a club you can reach out to them via mail and then join one of their meetings to see what they are doing. In April (the start of the academic year in Japan) they also organize a club fair where most clubs have a stand on campus and hand out flyers to attract new students. As I mentioned above, there are clubs and circles in the university. A circle is more leisurely meaning that even though they will probably have regular meetings or practice you are not expected to attend every one of them. On the other hand, clubs are usually stricter, and club members are usually expected to attend every practice and meeting which can be a lot. I did join a club, and thus I have training on Monday evenings, a meeting on Thursday, and training all day on Sunday and then do some additional training by myself. If I were a regular student at Ritsumeikan university I do not think I would like to keep that up for four years. Especially since we have training all day on Sundays, and thus I just have a one day weekend while, like I said, I am already very busy with my homework. However, for that one year I am studying at Ritsumeikan I think it was a very valuable experience. It gave me the opportunity to make Japanese friends, learn about Japanese university club culture, and some aspects of Japanese culture in general. Therefore, I can generally recommend to anyone who

is interested in that kind of experience to join a club, even though it can sometimes be very challenging or even frustrating.

Final thoughts

Looking back on my year in Kyoto I can say that it was a very valuable experience. There were times where it was stressful and challenging but mostly it was a year filled with joy and growth. Kyoto is great city to live in, it has such a rich history with many historical sites of interest but is also surrounded by nature and good leisure spots and I can recommend it to anyone thinking of studying abroad in Japan.