

Ritsumeikan University

My first semester at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto has already come to an end and I cannot believe how fast time here flies. I am more than happy to have chosen to do a one-year stay instead of only a semester – or to have gotten the opportunity to stay for a whole year in the first place.

The organization of my study abroad started about 1,5 years ago, where I attended the event of the International Office. The International Office Freiburg truly does an amazing job and whenever there are questions arising, they are happy to help right away and support us students whenever and wherever – before and during the stay abroad. The information provided is more than enough and you know exactly what to do for the application process.

After the event, you contact the person of the IO who is in charge of the country you would like to go to. You then receive a whole bunch of information on how the application process continues. For the first part of the application, which is for the IO Freiburg, you need a max. three-page long Letter of Motivation, which is probably the most time consuming, but since there is enough time – with the application being due in late October – it is more than manageable. Additionally, you need a letter of one of your professors where they fill out questions about you as a student. You are not allowed to see the letter, however, which is why they have to send it to the IO right away. For the application, you are able to choose a maximum of six partner universities all over Asia, in my case. To each, you add a brief reason on why you would like to go there. However, four to five sentences should be sufficient. To have an overview of all the partner universities, the IO has a map where they are all listed on, including the university's link where you can look for further information on their programs, accommodations, etc. The application is due at the end of October, first results of the IO are sent out mid-December.

After receiving the results, there is time for over a month to decide whether to accept the spot or not. There then was an appointment in the IO in early February, for which we also had to bring a signed pledge, stating we are taking the offered spot in the given partner university.

For Ritsumeikan University, the next step for the application began mid-March, where an online portal opened in which we had to fill out another application. For this part, again a Letter of Motivation and a letter of a professor is needed. Additionally, the partner university wants to see a copy of your bank account so they know you can finance your stay abroad. You have to have about 8.000 Euros on your bank account. However, it is possible to just have people transfer money to your account at time of the copy taken and then transferring it back. I did that, it is no problem. You are also able to apply for the university's scholarships, which are RUSSES (Ritsumeikan University Short-Term Exchange Student Scholarship), which offers 40.000 Yen each month, or JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization), which pays monthly 80.000 Yen. You apply for both, however, the partner university decides which one of the two you will receive, if any. You can also apply for the Baden Württemberg Stipendium, for which the application goes right to the International Office. In case you receive the BW Stipendium, you cannot receive RUSSES or JASSO, too.

The application was due mid-April, the results came at the end of June. Until then, there is generally not a lot of work to do except for waiting. The visa cannot be applied for yet, as we need a Certificate of Eligibility which is sent out by Ritsumeikan. They also advise you to not

book a flight before receiving the results. However, booking in advance with a free cancellation option should be fine, as waiting longer would only cause the flight to get more expensive.

After receiving the positive results, students have to hand in a doctor's note stating possible illnesses and the student's overall health status. The Certificate of Eligibility for the visa is sent out via email by now, so you receive it within a couple days. Even before receiving my results, I sent an email to the Japanese Embassy in Munich to book an appointment for a week I thought I should have the certificate by then, which was the first week of August and it worked out perfectly fine. The needed documents for the visa are listed on the website of the embassy. It takes about a week for them to get the visa done, so I had to go to Munich again after about a week to pick up my passport with the visa in it.

I do not quite remember when exactly it was, but before the final results, I also received an email of the host university where I could apply for the university's accommodation, which are three international houses and three private apartment blocks. The result of which accommodation you end up in is sent out together with the university's message on whether you get a spot at their university or not. For living abroad, I can definitely recommend living in an international house more. It enables you to meet a lot more people which is especially helpful in the first few weeks after moving to another country where everything is just unbelievably overwhelming. However, if you prefer being by yourself, the private apartment is, of course, recommendable, too.

In Ritsumeikan, students arrive in early September, but the semester starts about three to four weeks later. At first, I was a bit confused as to why we would have to arrive so early, but it makes actually so much sense. The time is definitely needed to adjust to a whole different life and get to know how things work there. Also, there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done in the first two weeks. Plus, it gives you the opportunity to travel to a lot of places prior semester start, as there is not that much time to travel while having classes. Our arriving period was the first weekend of September, and on Monday there was a Welcome Day on campus for all the international students already, which was super cool as it gave us the opportunity to meet and befriend people already! We also got our SKP (Study in Kansai Program) Buddies who helped us with a bunch of procedures that needed to be done, for example, going to the ward office to receive our Residence Card. We had to do a fire insurance, for which we had to pay about 8.000 Yen once. Then, we had to register for health insurance, which is mandatory and is about 1.600 Yen monthly. Health insurance in Japan does not cover everything, though, which is why it is recommendable to do a private health insurance back home prior traveling abroad. I did mine via travelsecure.de. :) For phone, sim cards can be bought right at the airport, or later online. A lot of people, including me, are using mobil. The sim card can be ordered online and then get picked up – in Kyoto it is in Kyoto Tower.

At first, the whole study abroad thing is extremely overwhelming after arriving in the host country. There are so many things to do, and it is quite hard to understand what actually needs to be done and *how*. However, there are so many other people going through the exact same thing which makes it a lot easier, and you can figure it out together. SKP Buddies went to the ward office with us, and to open a bank account, people in the international houses had their RM's (Resident Mentor) go with them, while in the private apartments, the landlord helped and accompanied the students to the post office.

I cannot recommend choosing too many courses for a semester. When doing the IJL (Intensive Japanese Language) track, you have about eight classes a week, consisting of comprehensive,

writing, and listening/speaking classes. They take a lot of time, as there are weekly tests, homework, presentations, midterms, etc. For students taking IJL, you cannot take more than two English classes, which is understandable considering the workload of each class. English classes also consist of a lot of readings, presentations, research papers, etc. What I wished to know prior studying is, that for IJL none of the teachers speak English very well, which is why they teach Japanese fully in Japanese. Which, of course, makes sense in higher levels, but they do that for level 1, which I was when I got here, with no knowledge of the language. Do not feel discouraged, though! It actually helps a lot more with the learning progress.

To get on campus, it depends on where you live. Living in the International House Taishogun does not need any transportation as it is only about a fifteen-minute walk to campus in distance. From the private apartments, I-House Tokiwa and, especially, Utano (which is most far away from campus), taking the bus or randen train is a must. Except for when you want to walk all the way, of course. However, to not have to pay 230 Yen twice each day to get on and off campus, the university offers a commuters pass which is paid once in the beginning of the semester. You can buy it monthly or get a three-month pass, which is cheaper and covers the whole semester right away.

Overall, I can 10/10 recommend a stay abroad. Ritsumeikan University is a great university with an amazing campus. The Kinugasa Campus has two cafeterias, which offer great food, , two convenience stores, a bento shop, which is my personal favorite, and cafes around campus! They also have the so-called BBP (Beyond Borders Plaza) which is my favorite place on campus. In the BBP are mostly international students and local students who are interested in the exchange with us internationals. It is generally hard to meet local students, which is why the BBP is the perfect place for that. They organize a lot of events each month where you can meet a lot of new people each time. Plus, there is also the possibility of finding a language exchange partner! What I also love is the grand variety of club and circle activities! Students who do not speak any Japanese, cannot join all clubs, though, as some require you to speak the language fluently. Still, the clubs are amazing, and I am sure everyone can find something for them! :)