

Experience Report
Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg
Exchange Year Autumn Semester 2023 – Summer Semester 2024
Sophia University Tokyo



上智大学
SOPHIA UNIVERSITY

Things I can conclude after staying at the Sophia University for two semesters is that doing an exchange year abroad really helped me in many ways, personally and academically. There are so many differences between Japan and Germany, that I had to get used to, which was definitely very challenging for me. But luckily, I am confident in saying that I have overcome all the obstacles throughout the past 10 month and that I matured in many ways.

Probably the most culture-shocking things when coming to Tokyo was, that no matter how big the city that you come from is, this city still surprises people with its size and the number of people that live and work here. Considered one of the biggest and most populated cities worldwide, for me who was born and raised in Freiburg, there were many things I had to get used to at first. Not only were the streets packed with people, and so were any kinds of public transport, and the university campus. This led me to be very tired at the end of the day for the first month of my stay. Nevertheless, I think I got quite used to the masses of people in Tokyo and might be able to say that overcoming this helped me to also get rid of my ‘anxiousness in masses of people’, since this was a thing I had difficulties with before I started my exchange year. Now I think it is normal for people to push you from the back when entering the train, or even bump into you while crossing the street, just because these people are also just trying to get to work or somewhere else in this metropole.

But not only did I make personal developments. Studying at one of the most renovated private universities in Japan, I could also expand my knowledge in many different academic fields. At Sophia University, I was enrolled in the Faculty of Liberal Arts (FLA), since exchange students were only allowed to take Japanese language courses, courses taught in English, or in my case as a German exchange student, courses of the German Department. As FLA only offers English-taught courses, there were many exchange students and international full-time students

in my class. It was interesting and fun to meet new people from different backgrounds and learn more about other cultures, but also tell them about mine. FLA is divided into three majors. Comparative Culture, International Business and Economics, and Social Studies. When applying for Sophia University, I had to give at least five courses from the syllabus that I was interested in. After some research I realized that the major of Comparative Culture was an interdisciplinary major in the humanities, which focuses on art history, visual culture, literature, religion, and philosophy. Since I am studying English and American Studies and Art History, this major in FLA was perfect. There were a few courses with content that I was already familiar with due to previous courses in Freiburg, but I could also learn new things, for instance about Japanese and American art. This helped me to expand my knowledge about art in general and made me apply different analysis methods and approaches on art history that I have learned at Sophia on topics of European art, which is the focus of my Art History degree in Freiburg. However, I did not only take classes of the Comparative Culture major, but also from Social Studies. One course that interested me was the “Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology”. Since it was my first anthropology course I had ever taken, I learned about the basics of anthropology. But also, since the lecturer was Japanese, she often included aspects of Japanese society and economy to give examples. There was a time she showed us a film about Japanese salary men, which was very interesting but also quite shocking, because it showed the terrible conditions some Japanese salary men must work under. It was almost like a culture shock. The grading system in Japan was in credits, and I got 4 credits per course. I usually had them twice a week consisting of 100 minutes per class each. Since I was interested in how German courses look like in Japan, I also took two courses from the German Department. There I met a Japanese student who is coming to the university in Freiburg as an exchange in autumn 2024. I told her a lot about my home university and helped her with things she had to do for the program.

One usual day on campus would start with the first period, which starts at 9:00 in the morning. Because it takes me about an hour from my dorm to the campus, which is totally different from the 20 minutes it takes me in Germany, I would leave my place at around 7:30. By arriving a little early, I would always go to one of the two cafes on campus that offer a breakfast for only 100 Yen including a sandwich and a drink. After that, I always went to class and met with friends from my dorm or from class to have lunch after. The lunch break starts at 12:25 and ended 13:30. Despite having a smaller campus, there were many options to go to get food. Two cafeterias, one Indian restaurant, one café that offers pasta, and many different food trucks that sell e.g. Kebab. During the breaks between classes, I sometimes went to the nearby

convenience store to get snacks. My classes would continue in the afternoon and after, I usually stayed at the university a bit longer for homework or waited to go to my club activities, racquetball and Japanese traditional drums. These I did approximately once a week each. With that I ended my day by either going out for dinner with the people from the club/circle, or by cooking something in the dorm kitchen. All I can say is that it has been an intensive academic schedule, but also a fun one that never made me complain about.

Before I came to Japan for this exchange year, there was never really the opportunity for me to travel across Japan. During the winter break, I was able to visit my family in the prefecture of Ishikawa. Before, the only time I had been to Japan to see my grandparents was summer due to the long summer break, so it was my first time I experienced winter in Ishikawa, let alone in Japan. It was totally different to when I was there in summer, with very cold days and a lot of snow. Sadly, in Tokyo there was only one day that had snow. But different to summer, which is usually very rainy because of rain season and typhoons, the winter has a lot of sunny days. I remember using my umbrella only about twice. It was also the first time I experienced New Year in Japan. This holiday is celebrated quite differently, comparable to the German Christmas. With your family, you gather and have a feast and spend time together. I think I made unforgettable memories then. One trip that I remember that impressed me a lot was to the Mount Fuji. The highest mountain in Japan that is famous for its beautiful shape, especially in winter with its white top. When I saw Fuji up close for the first time, it made me realize once again that I am in Japan and seeing one of the world heritages, and that this is something not everyone can experience. Other than doing trips to other cities, there are also many things that you can do within Tokyo. Another highlight and one of my dreams were to see the cherry blossoms in Japan. This year they bloomed between the end of March and the beginning of April. Even though I knew that Japan was famous for it and I had seen many photos of it before, it is still a completely different thing when you experience it yourself. Not only were there many people from other countries coming to Japan to see the cherry blossoms, but there is also an old tradition within the Japanese society to go and see them together. It was very beautiful and better than I had imagined. As a coffee lover, the city offered a big variety of cafés and one of my favorite activities on the weekends was café hopping. Also, Tokyo is one of the culinary hotspots, where you can find all kinds of cuisines, but also a lot of different Japanese restaurants because the Japanese cuisine is also very versatile. You might think that a big city such as Tokyo is only filled with skyscrapers, office buildings and houses. And especially coming from Freiburg, where you have access to nature almost everywhere, I was worried that there would not be enough spaces to relax and get away from the busy city life. However,

Tokyo had many parks that were perfect to go to for a walk or just a picnic. Still, as I am writing this, I am starting to miss the scenery of Freiburg a little bit. But coming to Tokyo, there are many activities that you can do, so it was never once boring.

To be honest, it is very hard to conclude my exchange year at Sophia very shortly, since it has happened so much that I cannot even describe in words. There are so many emotions I have felt the past months, so many new people I have met that I can consider as good friends now, and simply so many memories I have made that are irreplaceable that I will cherish forever. I am thanking everyone who made this exchange year possible and contributed to the astonishing time I had in Tokyo.

Cherry Blossoms at the Imperial Palace; Tokyo Skytree at night



Mount Fuji in December



Building 1 of Sophia University



Sophia University Festival in November

