

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



上智大学  
SOPHIA UNIVERSITY

I clearly remember the moment when I set foot on the Sophia University campus for the first time. Different from the Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg, which is a university with a wide campus spread throughout the whole city, Sophia is very compact and when looking up, all you can see are the high classroom buildings reaching up into the sky. It really made me realize, that I was going to spend the next two semesters in one of the largest and most populated cities in the world.

But, before I even arrived in Japan, I had to prepare a lot before the journey could actually start. After my application for the exchange year was out, it was around mid-December when the results of the nominations were sent to me. I am still as nervous as I was on that day when I think back to it. After I accepted my nomination, the next step was to apply directly at the host university. Luckily, the documents I had to hand in were similar as my previous application, which came in very handy. Additionally, I was positively surprised by the help that was provided by my host university, such as the fact that they gave me a list of their dormitories and other accommodations, so that I did not have to go apartment hunting myself. In Tokyo, that probably would have been very difficult and exhausting. After I got the official acceptance from Sophia University, I started to plan what I would need for my upcoming stay abroad.

The results of the housing application came quite late, just a few weeks before my departure to Japan. The dormitory that I get to stay for the two semesters is the Sophia Soshigaya International House, which is located in the Setagaya district. It takes around 20 minutes to my nearby station to take the train to Shinjuku, where I must transfer to another line. The overall time I need from my dorm to campus are 45 minutes, which might sound long, but is actually shorter than the average time one spends on public transport when moving around Tokyo. As the name already says, this dorm has many international students, which is why I felt easy to

connect with other (exchange) students from Sophia. The first days after moving into the dorm were probably the most stressful days until now. Nevertheless, people from the dorm office were able to help me and other students by taking us to the ward office. There we had to register our new address and had to purchase our health insurance and pension. These are mandatory for everyone who are staying in Japan for longer than three months. I was surprised about the mandatory pension we had to pay, because I had never heard of it before. The checks for the health insurance and the pension were sent a week after the visit to my mailbox and I could pay at any convenience store nearby.

When I was still in Germany, I made sure to order a credit card to be able to pay cashless in Japan, which was most important. Nevertheless, I can say that Japan still has many places that only accept cash. I also went to the Japanese Postbank and opened a bank account. This can be easily done, especially when one needs a Japanese bank account for a Japanese scholarship or when having a part-time job there. When applying for the Sophia University, you could ask for a student supporter that was going to help you in times of the arrival in Japan and uni. I was glad that I signed up for one. She was a freshman at Sophia and helped me a lot with things such as getting my commuter pass. We went to the Shinjuku station where I had to fill out a document with needed information and my student ID card, which I got on the first day of orienteering at Sophia. Now I can use the commuter pass for six months for exactly the trains I have to take to get to university.

There were two orienteering events before class started, where all international students got their Student ID card and the passwords for the university accounts, comparable to the German Ilias and HisinOne. There we got a detailed overview on how to behave while living in Japan and how to act in situations of natural disasters such as earthquakes.

One thing to keep in mind when coming to Japan is that it is a country with many natural disasters happening. I was instructed and made familiar with that fact beforehand, but it was a thought that got lost behind all the excitement for the exchange itself. At least up until I experienced an earthquake myself. Since Germany is a country where earthquakes are very rare, to be honest, it was very scary when the ground started to shake.

Nevertheless, the everyday life in Japan is exciting, especially after classes started. My supporter helped me choosing the right courses and we even got an instruction book on one of the orienteering events by the university as well, with step-by-step explanations of the course registration. Now that the first semester is already over, I can say, that Japanese students are a little bit shy at first but still get very open with you once they get to know you. The closest friends I could make was in one of the University sports clubs, where I play sports with other

Japanese students once or twice a week. And the city of Tokyo offers many things to explore in your free time, such as museums, parks, cafes and restaurants, flea markets, and so on, so there is always something to do. I'm looking forward to spending another semester in this interesting city and at the Sophia University.