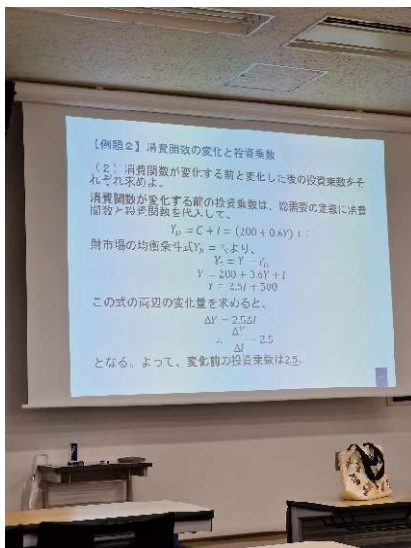


Ushioda Scholarship Report

Having gone through the pandemic era of university, I wasn't sure what to expect, when the fact that I was just weeks away from studying in Japan really dawned upon me. But suddenly I found myself on a plane, and reality hit me in the face when upon arriving at Narita International Airport, I was confronted by something that maybe many foreigners fear in Japan – being told 「日本語お上手ですね！」 (Your Japanese is good!).

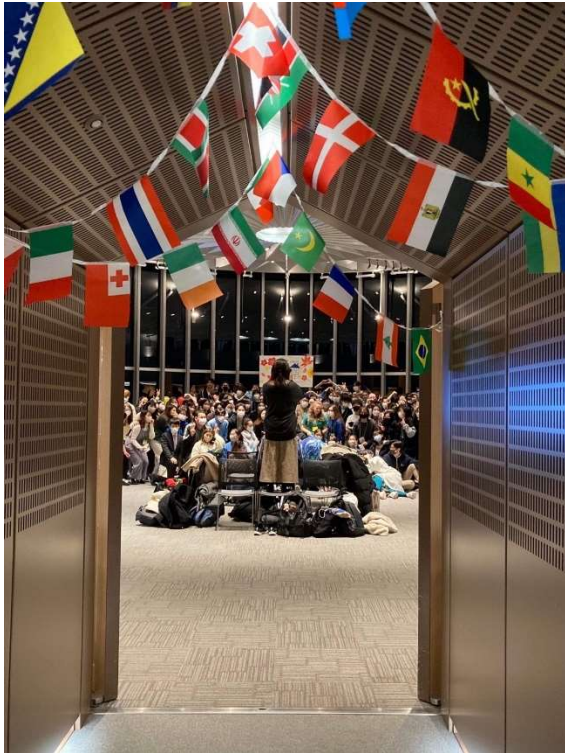
But in all seriousness, I was overwhelmed by both a sense of nervousness, as well as excitement, as I would now start my time studying abroad at Toyo University, in Tokyo. Although times are different in the present day, at the time I had arrived, I was met with the surprise of an airport that had a chilling silence. There wasn't the hustle and bustle that we typically associated with any international airport, and I am sure many of the exchange students who had arrived during that time must have also felt the same way.

I studied at 東洋大学 – Toyo University for one year, which I genuinely felt was a great option for many people who would like to study abroad in Japan. It is a large university with multiple campuses, and I feel that it caters very well for exchange students – in particular, people who are beginning their time studying Japanese. Toyo University's NEST Program (Nihongo for Exchange Students) makes use of several Japanese language classes, each with their own goals and deadlines. Having just had typically 2 or 3 Japanese modules in DCU, I felt that it was an exciting challenge for myself to grow my proficiency in Japanese in an integrated way – albeit it had felt workloads had been overwhelming at times. Accompanying these NEST classes, I also took several classes taught through English.



For people who manage to complete Toyo's NEST Program (or have already achieved the JLPT N2 or N1), there are also options for regular classes you can take which are instructed through Japanese. I was able to advance into taking regular classes after completing the NEST Program in my first semester, and I felt it was very interesting to be able to take subjects such as Economics or Finance instructed through Japanese in my second semester.

Average Maths for Macroeconomics class



AI-Project: SDG-themed event made by AI-House Residents

One very positive aspect of my life at Toyo, was the wealth of daily cultural exchanges I was given the opportunity to experience. I had lived at Toyo University's AI-House, which had been an international dorm designed to house both Japanese students at Toyo University, as well as exchange and international students – with the ideal that they could live together in harmony. The AI-House team had worked very well in this aspect, as they held events that really helped form a solid family within the dorm.

They had made every day at the dorm feel special – whether it was working together to bring dorm residents to support Toyo University's ice-hockey team, pushing forward our *professional* dorm chefs to cook up delicious meals for everyone; or just making the everyday feel fun through card and board game nights.

Naturally, there were many challenges that one can face during their time abroad in Japan. It could be simply not being able to read the Kanji written on a Japanese menu, not being familiar with the questions konbini staff may ask you, or even the cultural etiquette that you aren't aware of. When I had first arrived, I had made use of the insights I had previously picked up through consuming videos and blogs of people who had also gone on exchange – but of course they don't account for everything. I found myself almost double thinking every action I took, as I looked to assimilate and just act like a Japanese person would do. Among countless others, I was worried about the way I kept my bag in front of me on the train, making sure I was using the correct politeness of Japanese and walking or standing on the right side of the stairs or the street (...which I found changes depending on which part of Japan you are in).



View of Mt. Fuji, taken from Mt. Takao

Nevertheless, people embarking on an international exchange experience should remind themselves they are not alone in their worries and problems. Most people around me all faced the same problems I had. Being able to be united in that fact is something that I felt helped me along, as we laughed about the initial mistakes we had made or sharing our awkward conversations that had been lost in translation. Together, we brushed over the things that we didn't realise would be important, or things we didn't consider – and I feel this is a very important way to connect and

ultimately, make the most out of your experience, however long or short it may be.

Firstly, from the moment I had arrived in Japan, I made it a point to observe what other people had been doing around me, to make the settling in process as smooth as possible. It's a given, but there are many subtle things that people overlook – such as the way you take a seat at a restaurant, the general 'script' konbini workers follow when talking to you, or even the way somebody must operate the elevator buttons when multiple people are on board. Some of these subtle things and actions may seem daunting or foreign to you, but you will naturally take them in and come to appreciate them – I even found myself slightly 'reverse culture-shocked' when I came back to Ireland, and nobody had been standing by the elevator buttons.

Cherry blossoms and Tokyo Skytree

For people who are about to; or want to complete an exchange year, I feel that the most important thing you do, is just researching what you would like to do in your free time. I found one of the greatest appeals about Japan was the nature – researching about Japan’s flower seasons was something many people in my dorm had been almost religious about. Knowing what flowers bloom and when, can give you a starting point in deciding exactly where you would like to visit Japan – as many places are famous for the views you can take in during those seasons.



Ultimately, your time during exchange is yours to make, and it is a time for you to enjoy. It was a very meaningful experience that gifted me plenty of skills and gave me an avenue to further discover and develop my personal self. I learned to not be afraid to challenge myself and push myself past my comfort zone. My year abroad had left me with many challenges. However, for every challenge and low point I had faced, there was an equally amazing and warm memory that I was left with – and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Whether it was climbing up Mt. Takao with friends to see the first sunrise of 2023, late night konbini runs to get energy for studying, or even the endless memories I had made during my time travelling in Japan. In sum, I urge everyone where possible to make the most of their exchange in Japan and remember to not worry too much: no matter what happens, you will find your way.

My recommendations for Travel: Hakone and Hiroshima!

箱根神社- Rainy walk to Hakone Shrine



Hakone Yumoto Station



原爆ドーム - 広島

Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima



厳島神社

Itsukushima Shrine

