

## Review: 1 Semester Exchange at Tohoku University by Laura Young

Tohoku University is known for being one of the best universities in Japan, which is what drew me to apply for the otherwise often overlooked northern city of Sendai, rather than sunny Kagoshima. The quality of the university and its location in bureaucratic Japan meant putting in a certain effort into the application but the payoff was just as great.

Initially, I was worried I wouldn't be accepted to the program because I had switched majors after a long time and was in my 14<sup>th</sup> semester already, especially considering how highly recognized Tohoku University is. With the encouragement of the ISO, I applied nevertheless, focusing on my strengths (English, volunteer work, extracurricular activity) and it really paid off!

The IPLA (International Program for Liberal Arts) program, is a very well-established program which offers a large number of mandatory and elective classes taught in both English and Japanese depending on a student's skill level. We were supported and offered so many experiences over the course of the semester. In November, for example, we were taken on a two-day field trip to volunteer at a fishery plant that had been devastated by the 2011 disaster. Afterwards, we went to a lodge deep within the mountains and cooked outdoors under the stars. The program was designed to be collaborative, so we were well integrated with domestic students, who organized monthly events for us and helped wherever they could. I never felt helpless or alone at Tohoku University; everyone was exceptionally helpful.



Throughout our stay, we were assigned an academic advisor and given plenty of options for getting help with any problems during our exchange. Beyond that, even before we arrived in Japan, we were assigned a tutor (or rather 'buddy'). My tutor Reina was amazing from the get-go, and we immediately made a lot of plans together about what we would do and see together when I arrived in September. She was able to show me so many things (like Shiroishi castle, shown below) and we had really fun sleepovers.



Most of my classes were specifically designed to be accessible to students regardless of their major or country of origin. This could be both a blessing and a curse, depending on the work material itself and the participation of the other students. At times, I felt more like a high school student than a university student with the level of work I was doing; for example, many classes would require periodic reports or reflections of anywhere between 50-300 words. While this doesn't seem like much, it accumulated quickly, and I found myself spending a great deal of time doing homework that felt unrewarding despite how much time it ultimately consumed. The languages classes were particularly time consuming. I had 6 hours of Japanese comprehensive level 2 class every week and 3 hours of Kanji 1. Originally, I had been placed via the online test in Kanji 2, but the workload quickly became too much and I decided to take the beginner's class instead. The pace was the same and, in my opinion, a little bit too fast. Every 3 hour lesson in Japanese class covered an entire book chapter-: two chapters a week. Every lesson, we would hand in our homework and take a test that was both a review of the previous lesson and also covered the vocabulary for the new lesson. This was a lot of work.

My dormitory was Sanjo International House 2, which was slightly older but a private bathroom per dorm room. One issue that many students had was the presence of a security guard at the house who reinforced the rules that guests were not allowed after 10pm. This was a huge disadvantage to some of the other dorms, where people could let friends stay over during visits. For students who aren't in a natural science program (and therefore need to commute to Aobayama), I strongly suggest picking one of the Sanjo dorms, because they are close together. The student groups frequently held events in these dorms- from fun parties to cozy public viewings of Terrace House. There is no semester ticket like in Oldenburg, which makes traveling across the city cumbersome at times. Sanjo is pretty well situated, though.

My worst experience in Japan was typhoon Hagibis. During the night, we received many loud notifications on our phones about evacuations in the area and I could hear sirens wailing outside. Many of us had packed emergency backpacks just in case. The dormitories are incredibly stable, large buildings and we were therefore very safe. I have very little experience with natural disasters like typhoons or earthquakes, so it was a bit of a shock initially.



My best experience during my exchange was Christmas. We were able to dress up and march in the annual winter parade, Pageant of Starlight. Furthermore, the IPLA director invited the class she was teaching, International Project 1, to her house. There, she had prepared dishes from each of our home countries and encouraged us to make our own sushi. We were a very large group and the atmosphere was so kind and familiar. In the end, we were driven home and given little gift bags filled with Japanese candy. It was the best, most festive Christmas I have had in many years.

Overall, my experience at Tohoku University was exceptionally positive. While it required a lot of work to apply and go keep up with the schoolwork, there was a high payoff. I got to see a lot of incredible things and my Japanese skills have greatly improved. The network in IPLA is so strong and it feels like a giant family. During our farewell party, we received little photo albums which documented all our adventures together. It was such an incredible time and I made some amazing friends.

