Exchange Semester at Kindai University, Japan

Exchange period: [April 2026 – July 2026]

Home university: Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW)

Host university: Kindai University, Osaka, Japan

1. Introduction

My exchange semester at Kindai University in Osaka was an experience that I will remember for a long time. Although the semester started more difficultly than I had expected, particularly with regard to administrative preparation and course registration, the overall experience was very positive. Living in another country for approximately four months gave me the opportunity to experience Japan not only as a tourist, but as a student and as part of everyday life.

Before the exchange, I had already visited Japan once for approximately ten days. Therefore, I was not completely unfamiliar with the country and already had a positive impression of Japan. Nevertheless, living there for several months was very different from a short tourist visit. Some of the expectations and stereotypes I had about Japan were confirmed, while other aspects turned out to be considerably different from what I had expected.

Looking back, I would recommend completing an exchange semester at least once during one's studies. I would not necessarily repeat the exact same experience myself, but I am very glad that I took the opportunity to live abroad for four months.

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2. Preparation and Arrival

2.1 Visa and preparation

The preparation for the exchange required a considerable amount of administrative work. The visa process itself was relatively straightforward in my experience. I applied through the Japanese consulate in Frankfurt and had a positive experience there. One aspect that initially caused some uncertainty was determining which consulate was responsible for my application, as my place of residence in Germany had changed several times due to my dual study program. I was ultimately able to clarify this directly with the consulate.

For future exchange students, I would therefore recommend investigating the responsible consulate early and allowing sufficient time for the visa process, as the exact processing time may vary.

The preparation also included several financial and medical requirements, as well as booking the flight and providing the required flight information. Some of these requirements had to be completed relatively early, meaning that significant expenses such as flights and accommodation had to be planned and financed before the semester even started.

2.2 Communication during preparation

One of the more difficult aspects of the exchange was the communication during the preparation phase and during the first weeks in Japan.

I want to emphasize that some of the difficulties were also caused by my own mistakes, particularly because I overlooked some emails. At the same time, I felt that certain information could have been communicated more clearly and at an earlier stage.

For example, I had to submit several documents within a relatively short period after a deadline had already passed. Although the responsible staff member was accommodating and allowed additional time for submitting the documents, I only received a reminder after the relevant one-month period had ended. Because several things had to be organized at the same time, including significant financial payments, medical appointments and documents for the university, this resulted in a considerable amount of stress.

In my opinion, a reminder earlier during the relevant period could have prevented some of this stress. I also believe that more detailed information shared with my home university before the exchange could have reduced later confusion.

This was particularly relevant when dealing with course selection and the Learning Agreement. The staff member responsible for exchange students understandably could not manage communication between every exchange student and every home university individually. However, in my situation, I would have benefited from clearer information being communicated to my home university’s responsible department in advance.

Overall, I found the administrative preparation to be the most challenging part of the exchange. At the same time, the staff were generally friendly and, when problems arose, they tried to find solutions where possible.

3. Course Registration and Academic Organization

The course registration process was another area in which my expectations were not completely met.

Before arriving in Japan, I had to prepare a Learning Agreement with my home university based on the available course list. At the time, I was not aware that some courses had maximum participant numbers and would therefore be subject to a lottery. This meant that I had to reconsider parts of my Learning Agreement and remained uncertain about whether I would actually be able to attend some courses until relatively late in the application process.

This was particularly difficult because my home university places considerable importance on having an appropriate Learning Agreement before the semester starts. I therefore had to communicate extensively with my home university about a situation for which I did not initially have all the necessary information.

There were also some scheduling difficulties. The application materials contained information about course times, but the actual structure of the timetable was not completely clear to me at the time. As a result, my initial Learning Agreement contained several courses whose schedules overlapped. Neither I nor the responsible department at my home university was initially aware of all of these conflicts.

In hindsight, a clearer explanation of the timetable structure, course capacity restrictions and the possibility of lottery courses before the Learning Agreement was finalized would have made the process considerably easier.

At the same time, I do not want to describe the entire administrative process negatively. The staff were accommodating in several situations and gave me additional time when necessary. My criticism is primarily that some information could have been provided earlier and more systematically.

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4. Campus and University Facilities

One of the first things that impressed me about Kindai University was the campus itself. The campus is very attractive and provides a calm and pleasant environment for studying. This is

perhaps not surprising given that Kindai is a private university, but the quality and variety of the facilities were nevertheless impressive.

The campus environment made everyday university life very pleasant. There were various places where students could study, eat or spend time between classes.

The campus also has a small convenience store, which was very useful for everyday needs.

Another particularly useful facility was the university gym. The gym is accessible 24 hours a day and uses a digital access system with app-based QR codes and automated entry. The equipment was more than sufficient for balanced training, and I found the pricing fair considering the availability and variety of equipment. Although it is not necessarily the cheapest gym available, the combination of location, opening hours and equipment makes it very convenient for students.

The university also has a clinic. I had the opportunity to use it during my exchange and found the service professional and accommodating. Even though most of the staff primarily communicated in Japanese, they made considerable efforts to assist me as an international student.

Overall, I found the facilities on campus to be one of Kindai's strongest aspects.

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5. Accommodation

The accommodation provided for the exchange semester was very convenient.

The apartment itself was small, but it contained almost everything necessary for everyday life. The most noticeable limitation was the lack of a conventional stove, which required some adaptation when preparing food. Apart from that, I found the apartment practical and suitable for a semester abroad.

The location was particularly convenient because of ist proximity to campus. The short commute made everyday university life much easier and meant that I did not have to spend a significant amount of time travelling to and from classes.

The air conditioning was also very useful, particularly towards the summer months. Being able to use the system for both cooling and heating was convenient throughout the semester.

Overall, I was satisfied with the accommodation, especially because of ist location.

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6. Academic Experience

6.1 Courses and workload

The academic experience differed somewhat from what I had expected.

Overall, I found the academic level and workload lower than I had anticipated based on my experience at DHBW. This is a personal comparison rather than a general judgment of the academic quality of Kindai University, as the structure and objectives of the courses are different.

The difference became particularly apparent towards the end of the semester. The final examinations and assessments were generally manageable, and I found the overall workload relatively light compared with what I am accustomed to at my home university.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the courses were without value. Several courses provided interesting perspectives and experiences that differed from the teaching I am used to in Germany.

6.2 Portfolio grading

One aspect of the academic system that I particularly appreciated was the use of continuous assessment and portfolio-style grading.

Instead of relying primarily on one large final examination, several courses included numerous smaller assignments and activities throughout the semester. Individual tasks often contributed only a relatively small percentage to the final grade.

I found this approach very positive because it reduced the pressure associated with a single final examination and encouraged students to remain engaged throughout the semester. It also made it easier to recover from a weaker individual assignment.

This was one of the academic aspects that I would personally be happy to see used more frequently at my home university.

6.3 Attendance

I also found the attendance requirements fair and manageable. The system was relatively transparent, and attendance was taken seriously without feeling unnecessarily strict.

Compared with my experience at home, where absences generally have to be formally excused regardless of the reason, I found the system at Kindai relatively straightforward.

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7. Teaching Style and Classroom Culture

The lecturers were one of the strongest positive aspects of the university experience.

The teachers I encountered were generally friendly, approachable and supportive. Even when the academic organization of a course was not ideal, the lecturers themselves were often flexible and willing to help students.

There were noticeable differences in teaching styles between lecturers.

Many of the American and Canadian native English-speaking lecturers placed considerable emphasis on active participation. They regularly asked students questions and encouraged them to contribute directly to discussions.

Several Japanese lecturers followed a more lecture-centered approach, with the lecturer presenting information while students listened. This reminded me more of the traditional classroom culture I am familiar with in Germany.

At the same time, most lecturers, regardless of background, actively encouraged group work and interaction between Japanese and international students. Mixed seating arrangements and group activities were common and provided useful opportunities for cultural exchange.

I also noticed differences in classroom behavior. Japanese students were generally quiet and respectful during lectures, particularly when the lecturer was speaking. International students were sometimes considerably more vocal and occasionally continued discussions while the lecturer was speaking. Some lecturers tolerated this for quite a long time, while others intervened more directly.

Overall, I found the classroom atmosphere respectful. The differences were interesting to observe because they reflected different approaches to classroom participation and teacher-student interaction.

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8. English Language Experience

English was an important part of my exchange experience.

A B2 level of English or higher is required for students participating in the English-language exchange program. I had obtained a B2 certificate approximately five years ago, with a score of around 93 out of 100.

Although I had continued using English over the years through YouTube, games and other media, I had not actively used it on a daily basis to the same extent as I had during school and vocational training.

During the exchange, I noticed a significant improvement in my English skills simply because I was forced to use the language constantly.

I used English for lectures, assignments, conversations with other students, administrative communication and everyday situations. This affected speaking, listening and writing skills alike.

The English proficiency of lecturers varied considerably. Native English-speaking lecturers obviously provided very fluent and natural English, while some Japanese lecturers occasionally struggled with fluency or were more difficult for me to understand.

Nevertheless, the constant exposure to English was extremely valuable. One of the unexpected benefits of the exchange was realizing how quickly language skills can improve again when the language is actively used every day.

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9. Language Barrier and Everyday Communication

Although I found communicating in English at university relatively easy, everyday life in Japan presented a different challenge because much of the information encountered outside the university was in Japanese.

One surprisingly difficult aspect was shopping for everyday products. I was unfamiliar with most Japanese brands, and it was often difficult to determine the differences between products simply by looking at their packaging.

This was particularly noticeable when buying products such as detergent or toothpaste. Japanese stores offer many specialized products, but the information is often written primarily in Japanese. Even choosing something as simple as toothpaste therefore required more consideration than it would have in Germany.

Translation tools were extremely useful. I frequently used translation applications and ChatGPT to understand Japanese information. Google Chrome’s automatic website translation was also helpful, particularly when using university websites.

Nevertheless, I would strongly recommend learning at least some basic Japanese before arriving. Even a relatively small vocabulary of common words and phrases can make everyday situations significantly easier.

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10. Everyday Life and Convenience

One of the things I appreciated most about Japan was the general convenience of everyday life.

Convenience stores are extremely widespread and are available even on Sundays and national holidays. This was a noticeable difference compared with Germany.

Food was also very accessible. There were numerous restaurants near the accommodation and campus. One of the biggest everyday feel-good factors for me was discovering a ramen restaurant very close to where I lived. Since I particularly enjoy ramen, having a restaurant nearby that I could visit easily became part of my routine.

I also enjoyed the variety of food available at convenience stores. Some inexpensive meals were surprisingly good considering their price. Convenience stores were useful not only for food but also for everyday necessities.

Vending machines are another example of this convenience. They are extremely widespread and were particularly useful during the hot summer months.

Food delivery through services such as Uber Eats was also considerably more convenient and, in some cases, comparatively inexpensive compared with Germany. However, I would consider this more of a personal convenience than a recommendation, as healthier local food options are certainly preferable for regular meals.

Overall, the convenience of everyday life is something I will miss after returning to Germany.

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11. Transportation

Public transportation was another particularly positive aspect of living in Japan.

The subway, tram and railway systems were very punctual and reliable. Once I understood how the system worked, travelling around Osaka and the surrounding area became relatively easy.

IC cards such as ICOCA were particularly useful. They make public transportation much more convenient because there is no need to purchase an individual ticket for every journey.

The initial process of understanding where to purchase and recharge an IC card was somewhat confusing for me, but after figuring it out, it became one of the easiest parts of everyday life.

Google Maps was also extremely reliable for navigation and public transportation planning.

For future exchange students, I would recommend carrying some cash at all times. Although major chains and convenience stores often accept credit cards, smaller local shops and restaurants may still require cash.

ATMs at convenience stores, particularly 7-Eleven, were also very convenient for withdrawing money using an international bank account.

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12. Financial Considerations

Financial preparation is an important aspect of the exchange that should not be underestimated.

Several large expenses occur before or at the beginning of the semester, particularly accommodation and flights. Some additional course-related costs may also occur.

One of my courses included an additional fee for an event at the end of the semester. The lecturer was very flexible, but I believe such costs should ideally be communicated clearly before students commit to the course, especially because not every exchange student has the same financial resources.

At the same time, I recognize that students also have a responsibility to ask questions when information is unclear. The university offices were available during normal working days, and some of the confusion could probably have been avoided by asking for clarification earlier.

Overall, I would recommend preparing a realistic budget before departure and keeping some financial reserve for unexpected costs.

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13. Banking, SIM Card and Digital Services

A local bank account was not necessary for me during the exchange. International bank accounts could be used for most everyday purposes, and cash could easily be withdrawn from convenience-store ATMs.

I personally preferred using an eSIM that I purchased before travelling to Japan. This provided sufficient mobile data at a reasonable price, while Wi-Fi was available at the accommodation and on campus.

The university also offered an opportunity to purchase a local SIM card shortly after arrival. This was useful, although students should be prepared to provide identification and payment information digitally.

The university's UNIPA system was more difficult to use at first. The interface and much of the information were in Japanese, which made the system confusing during the course registration period. Translation tools, particularly browser-based translation, were therefore very useful.

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14. Technology and Hardware

I would recommend bringing a reliable laptop to Japan.

Many everyday academic tasks can probably be completed using a tablet, particularly reading documents, taking notes and accessing course materials. Apple devices are also very common, and many students use MacBooks and iPads.

Nevertheless, I personally found having access to a Windows laptop very useful. Some administrative tasks, document handling and university-related systems are more convenient when using a full laptop and a Windows environment.

Before the exchange, I specifically purchased a comparatively expensive laptop for the semester. Looking back, this investment was probably not strictly necessary. However, the device proved extremely useful for studying, organization, administrative tasks and general quality of life.

My recommendation would therefore not be to purchase an expensive laptop specifically for the exchange, but rather to make sure that a reliable laptop is available if possible.

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15. Student Life and Social Integration

Social integration was one of the more challenging aspects of my exchange.

I did not make particularly close friendships during the semester. Japanese students often appeared reserved or shy when communicating with exchange students, although I noticed that they were generally much more relaxed when communicating with their Japanese friends.

This made initial social integration somewhat difficult. The situation improved slightly over time, but not dramatically.

At the same time, I had several pleasant interactions with Japanese students. I went to the gym and ate with Japanese students, and I also had the opportunity to attend karaoke with a Japanese student and her friends.

The Global Language Time sessions were another useful opportunity to communicate with both Japanese and international students. These events gave me the opportunity to have conversations with people I otherwise might not have met.

I also experienced periods of loneliness, particularly during the beginning of the semester. I think this is worth mentioning because an exchange semester does not automatically mean constantly making friends or having an active social life. The experience can be very different for different students.

By the end of the semester, I felt somewhat more comfortable socially, although I would not describe myself as deeply integrated into the Japanese student community.

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16. Global Education Center and Activities

The Global Education Center played an important role in the exchange program.

The Japanese students working part-time for the university and helping organize events were consistently friendly. They were often visible around the university and were particularly involved in events and activities for exchange students.

The university also offered several excursions to surrounding areas. These included trips involving Nara, Kobe, Ise and Iga, with activities such as sushi, strawberries, Cup Noodles, a harbor walk, yakiniku, Ise Shrine, rice planting and a ninja experience.

These excursions were a very good opportunity for exchange students to experience places outside Osaka. The tours were also comparatively inexpensive for exchange students.

The communication concerning the prices was not always completely clear, as some documents showed the original prices while other communication showed the discounted exchange-student prices. This initially made me believe that some tours were considerably more expensive than they actually were.

Again, I believe this was partly a communication issue and partly my own responsibility to ask for clarification. Nevertheless, clearer and more consistent information would have made the decision-making process easier.

The university also offered volunteering opportunities. Although I did not participate in all of these activities, I appreciated that such opportunities existed.

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17. Safety, Cleanliness and Climate

I generally felt very safe during my time in Japan.

I did not lose any belongings during the semester and found that normal precautions were sufficient for me. I generally kept valuable items in secure pockets, particularly during travel and excursions.

Japan also lived up to my expectations regarding cleanliness. Most areas I visited were very clean, although I noticed some less clean areas, particularly when travelling towards more rural locations.

The climate was another noticeable part of the experience. Towards the end of the semester, temperatures regularly exceeded 30 degrees Celsius and humidity became an important factor.

The weather was often relatively consistent during the day. When it rained, it could remain rainy for a considerable part of the day, and umbrellas were extremely common and easy to find.

The air conditioning in the accommodation was particularly useful during the hotter months.

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18. Cultural Observations

One of the most interesting aspects of the exchange was discovering that some expectations about Japan were confirmed while others were challenged.

Many well-known impressions of Japan proved accurate from my perspective. Public transportation was highly punctual, everyday life was very convenient, public spaces were generally clean, and there was a strong emphasis on politeness and respect.

At the same time, living in Japan also showed me that not everything is necessarily as idealized as it can appear from outside the country.

The administrative organization of the university was more complicated than I had expected. The language barrier was more noticeable in everyday life than in an academic environment. Social integration could also be more difficult than expected because of differences in communication styles.

One of the most interesting contrasts was therefore between Japan as a tourist destination and Japan as a place to live and study.

During my previous ten-day visit, I mainly experienced the country as a tourist. During the exchange semester, I had to deal with ordinary everyday tasks such as buying detergent, registering for courses, handling university systems, managing money and communicating with people in situations where English was not always available.

This gave me a much more realistic understanding of everyday life in Japan.

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19. Personal Highlights

There were many memorable experiences during the semester.

The cherry blossom season was one of the highlights, particularly because it was my first time experiencing it in Japan.

Seeing the Kindai campus for the first time was also memorable because the campus itself was more impressive than I had expected.

Another major benefit of the exchange was the opportunity to travel. Experiences such as visiting Himeji Castle and Arima Onsen were among my favorite memories.

I also particularly enjoyed spending time at the gym and occasionally training or eating with Japanese students.

On a more everyday level, discovering a good ramen restaurant close to my accommodation became one of the most enjoyable parts of my routine. Small experiences like this contributed considerably to my overall sense of comfort during the semester.

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20. What I Learned

One of the clearest things I learned during the exchange was that living abroad is very different from visiting another country.

Even though I had already visited Japan before, four months of living there required me to adapt to many situations that I had never encountered during a short holiday.

The exchange also showed me how quickly language skills can improve through continuous use. My English had remained functional over the years, but I had not used it as actively as I had during school. Being surrounded by English every day noticeably improved my speaking, listening and writing abilities.

I also became more familiar with handling unfamiliar situations independently. Even relatively simple tasks could initially become complicated when information was presented in Japanese

or when I did not understand how a particular system worked. Over time, these situations became easier to handle.

The exchange therefore taught me that adaptation is not necessarily immediate. Some aspects of living abroad became comfortable only after several weeks.

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21. Recommendations for Future Exchange Students

Based on my experience, I would recommend future students to prepare particularly carefully for the following points:

Before departure

* Read previous exchange reports carefully.
* Check all emails and deadlines regularly.
* Clarify the course registration process and possible course restrictions early.
* Prepare for possible changes to the Learning Agreement.
* Confirm all major financial requirements before departure.
* Investigate which Japanese consulate is responsible for the visa application.
* Prepare important documents digitally and physically.
* Consider arranging an eSIM before arrival.
* Learn some basic Japanese before travelling.

During the first weeks

* Do not worry if everyday life initially feels complicated.
* Set up an IC card as soon as possible.
* Keep some cash available.
* Learn how to use UNIPA and translation tools.
* Ask university staff directly whenever information is unclear.
* Do not underestimate the initial adjustment period.

For everyday life

* Convenience stores are extremely useful.

* A reliable laptop is highly recommended.

* Familiar products from Germany can be worth bringing, particularly if you have specific preferences.

* Google Maps is extremely useful for transportation and navigation.

* A translation tool is practically essential.

* Prepare for high temperatures and humidity during the summer.

* Keep some emergency money available.

Most importantly, I would recommend reading previous exchange reports before departure. I personally did not make as much use of previous reports as I could have, and in hindsight I believe they could have helped me prepare better for several aspects of the exchange. Future students should take advantage of the experiences of those who have already completed the program.

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22. Final Reflection and Conclusion

Looking back on the entire semester, I consider the exchange a great experience overall.

The beginning was considerably more difficult than I had expected. Administrative uncertainty, course registration, communication issues and the general adjustment to living in another country created a lot of stress during the first weeks. I also struggled socially and experienced periods of loneliness.

However, these difficulties did not define the entire semester.

As time passed, everyday life became easier. I became more comfortable with public transportation, university systems, shopping, communication and living independently. I also had the opportunity to travel, experience Japanese culture, improve my English and interact with Japanese and international students.

The semester also changed my perception of Japan. I arrived in Japan with considerable enthusiasm and already had a positive opinion of the country because of my previous visit. During the semester, I learned that not everything is as ideal as it may sometimes appear from abroad. At the same time, many of the positive stereotypes about Japan were confirmed through my everyday experiences.

What I appreciate most about the exchange is simply having had the opportunity to live abroad for four months. I was able to experience Japan from a perspective that is impossible to gain from a short tourist visit.

After returning to Germany, I noticed that I miss some aspects of Japanese life, particularly the general convenience and the feeling of being abroad in a completely different cultural environment. At the same time, I appreciate having familiar products and routines available again.

I would not necessarily repeat the exact same exchange experience, but I would strongly recommend that students experience living abroad at least once during their studies. An exchange semester offers much more than academic experience. It provides the opportunity to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances, encounter different approaches to education and communication, experience another culture in everyday life and gain a better understanding of one’s own expectations.

Despite the difficult beginning, I am very happy that I took this opportunity.