

William Brydon (University of Canterbury) on Exchange at Bunkyo University, Saitama 2008-2009

My name is William Brydon, a Japanese Major at the University of Canterbury. At the time of writing I am completing a one year exchange programme at Bunkyo University, Saitama.

As an exchange student I am enrolled in the International Department (the Bekka), which provides an intensive education in all areas of Japanese language study. Classes are streamed according to ability, from beginner through to advanced. The number of pupils per class is usually small, allowing for plenty of personal interaction with and personal feedback from my tutors. It also meant that my classmates and I got to know each other very quickly and have formed strong friendships.

Courses within the Bekka are tailored towards preparing students to enter Japanese Universities. Therefore in addition to language classes, a limited number of core subject options such as History, Geography, and Mathematics are also available. I also had the opportunity to take mainstream classes alongside the local Japanese students. The format of these classes was much more reminiscent of a NZ University lecture. Compared to the Bekka the variety of subject options is much more diverse, allowing me to participate in lectures on Modern Literature, Calligraphy and Sociology.

There was a lot to take in on arrival but the teachers and administrators were both welcoming and sympathetic. The university provides accommodation in a two bedroom apartment, which I share with another exchange student. Rent is 30000 yen per person/per month, with utility costs divided evenly between us. Bicycles are also provided, with the campus an easy 20 minute ride away. The students of the 'Wacchi' (International Friendship Club) also helped me settle into my new surroundings, assisting with the setup of bank accounts and cell phone plans.

Being the only native English-speaking student (and the only Kiwi) on campus felt isolating at first. However I can now count this as blessing in that it really forced me to assert myself and get to grips with new people and surroundings. You will be constantly peppered with questions about your culture, and asked to provide a New Zealand perspective on issues both inside and outside the class room.

There is a strong club culture among the Japanese students, participation in which can be a real gateway to settling in, developing new hobbies and most importantly, making friends! International students are relatively rare at Bunkyo, and you will get a warm welcome whichever club you approach. Sports clubs are the most accessible, but cultural clubs are also popular. I greatly enjoyed participating in the Calligraphy clubs' annual exhibition, and learning the tea ceremony with the 'Chado' Club.

Throughout the year the University arranged a number of field trips and cultural exchange opportunities for us, as well as providing information and link-ups on a myriad of home-stay, cultural outings, day trips, and other extra-curricular excursions which could be enjoyed in our own time.

Independent travel is also strongly recommended, and even for those of limited means adventure is never far away. Saitama is well situated in the heart of the Kanto plains, 50mins from the Tokyo metropolis, and a matter of hours from the tourist hubs of Yokohama, Kamakura, Nikko and Hakone, all of which I can strongly recommend as great weekend excursions. Further advice I'd give to any future exchange student would be:

- Make buying an electronic dictionary one of your top priorities. It will cost you an arm and a leg, but the convenience it provides makes it an excellent investment in your studies.
- Be careful on your bicycle. Though Japan is a very law-abiding country; near the campus the cyclist's road rules go largely unheeded by the local, which can put you in dangerous situations. Moreover, there is no requirement to wear a helmet.
- Always keep one eye on the exchange rate. In such economically volatile times this can make a huge difference in your how far you can stretch your New Zealand dollars.
- Aside from rent, your biggest expenses will be on food. Buying from the local high street specialty stores for meat, vegetables, fruit and tofu etc will get you more value for you money than the supermarket or convenience store.
- Seize the day! Don't be shy to speak up, and put yourself out there! Even though you may initially lack confidence in your language ability, as the only New Zealander on campus you may quickly find yourself becoming something of a local celebrity. Many Japanese students will also be thrilled to have a chance to

practise their English with a native speaker, and help you with your Japanese in return. Being the focus of such intense attention may feel odd or even uncomfortable at first, but don't waste the opportunity of first impressions that their warm welcome presents. Learn the Haka and/or your favorite NZ song off by heart, brush up on your New Zealand facts and anecdotes then really thrust yourself into your new surroundings!

In closing I must thank Prof. Long, Naomi Collins and the rest of the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund Management Committee for their invaluable support, enabling me to maximize my experience on exchange while keeping my studies at the centre of my attention. Likewise I must thank the University of Canterbury, in particular Profs. Henshall, Payne and Palmer of the Japanese Department, and Dr Foster of the International Office, for their support in enabling this rare opportunity.



Bunkyo University



Celebrating the year of the Ox



Class trip to Kamakura



Viewing the Autumn Leaves with friends



Enjoying Matsuri atmosphere



Making "Mochi" rice cakes