

My name is Daan de Heij. During the 2016/2017 fall semester I was on exchange in **Tokyo** attending **Hitotsubashi University**.

Right off the bat, I'm going to share something personal with you. It was my last evening in Japan. I walked through Shinjuku station, the world's busiest train station in number of passengers. In that last week I had been super busy: packing my suitcase, doing administrative tasks, doing some last-minute sightseeing. But when I was walking there it finally hit me: 'I'm leaving Japan tomorrow' and I burst into tears. Why? Because I had had a great time in Japan. Tokyo is an awesome city, the Japanese people are so friendly and nice, and I made a bunch of new friends. I was incredibly grateful for having had the opportunity to go on this exchange. Thus, I hope you will make the same (correct) decision as I did haha. So let me tell you about everything. I'm going to be honest and tell you the (mostly) good, but also the not so convenient things about this exchange.

## Preparation

The application for Hitotsubashi was really **lengthy**. I think during that block, I spent more time on the exchange application than my courses at Erasmus. Hitotsubashi requires you to fill in a bunch of forms, and some of them have to be sent to Japan by (old-school) mail. Furthermore, an **x-ray** (to check for tuberculosis) is required and I believe a TOEFL/IELTS (one of the two) certificate. I took the x-ray in my local hospital, which was pretty straightforward.

**Pro tip!**: if you already have some sort of proof of your English being of sufficient level, ask if that suffices before taking the **TOEFL/IELTS**. In my case, I have a Cambridge CPE certificate and I'm taking Econometrics in English in Rotterdam. Under these conditions, Hitotsubashi waived the TOEFL/IELTS requirement. So definitely save yourself the money and do the same.

Fortunately, the Hitotsubashi International Affairs Office is **not very strict** when it comes to the deadline for all this paperwork. Also the International Affairs Office is very friendly and helpful (typical Japanese service) and **they reply to your emails very fast**. They were much more approachable than the ESE exchange office. So during your applications, definitely send Hitotsubashi any questions you have.

The visa application at the Japanese embassy in The Hague is a relatively fast and painless procedure and doesn't require much paperwork. Much less hassle compared to an American visa (and the employees are way more friendly). Then there is the application for JASSO, the grant of the Japanese Government of an unbelievable **¥80.000 (+- €650) monthly**. All the ESE Hitotsubashi exchange students received it, and from reading the student report of previous years so did the ESE students from previous years. So it is not a competitive thing. The application is easy too: the ESE exchange coordinator just has to put your name on a list. You do have to go the coordinator yourself though and bother him/her about it. We almost missed out on JASSO because we thought that she would already take care of that. Moreover, I was quite confused during the JASSO application because one of the requirement stated was that the recipient had to require financial support and I could have financed the exchange myself. I have never heard about that requirement again after I got to Japan, so go ahead and apply for JASSO even though you could finance the exchange without.

Up until now, Hitotsubashi houses all exchange students in the Kodaira dorms. This is very convenient, because you don't need to look for a room yourself. The dorms are only about 20 minutes by bicycle or train from Hitotsubashi's campus in Kunitachi and 'downtown Tokyo' is about 40 minutes by train from the dorms.

## **But... Hitotsubashi's semester and ESE block 3 overlap**

Hitotsubashi's winter semester **starts** in the **end of September** and **ends** in **early February**. You will have a very long summer holiday, but if you stay until the end you miss about three weeks of ESE block 3. What I did was I enrolled in classes at Hitotsubashi that did **not have any exams** at the end, but only papers and assignments that could be handed in online. I took one course that did have a final exam, but the teacher of that course made an exemption for us and didn't require us to take it. The teachers at Hitotsubashi are very approachable and usually want (and don't mind) to help you out, so you can and should try to **arrange something with them**.

This enabled me to return home January 21<sup>st</sup>. The first week at home I was still completing my Hitotsubashi assignments and currently I'm trying to catch up on my backlog of ESE courses. This is not the most relaxed way to return from an exchange, but I do have a chance at passing my upcoming exams.

In my opinion, this is really a disadvantage of this destination. Some people decide to postpone their studies for a year, and to them these overlapping academic calendars don't matter much. But me, before I left I found myself worrying about how I was going to do this. While I was in Japan I spent quite some time arranging my early return and the first weeks at home are immediately stressful. Because of the uncertainty of your return date, I would strongly recommend to either book a one-way ticket or a flexible date ticket to Tokyo (Narita).

## Arrival

The scary and exciting part! Getting on the plane :D Hitotsubashi arranged a **pick-up bus** for us from Narita Airport to the dorms in Kodaira for a very reasonable ¥5000 (+- €40). Narita Airport is actually quite far from 'downtown Tokyo' and even farther from Kodaira. It takes about 1.5 – 2 hours.

You can be adventurous and go the dorms yourself by public transportation. This would save you some money and is way more fun of course, immediately immersing yourself in Tokyo. But you will be tired after your flight, and on the Hitotsubashi bus you get to meet some other exchange students. Going to Kodaira yourself is not actually that difficult, but if you do make sure you take detailed directions with you. Also, keep in mind that the Tokyo public transportation is very crowded during rush hour and therefore it will be very difficult (and frowned upon by other passengers) to board with suitcases and/or big backpacks.

Arriving in Tokyo was a crazy experience for me because I had never been to Japan before and you will meet about a hundred new people during the first day. Now try to remember so many names after travelling for hours... It really takes a couple of days before you're settled. You need to get yourself a **Pasmo** or **Suica**, which is the Japanese equivalent of the OV-Chipkaart. You need to buy bed sheets, towels, groceries. Also, definitely buy a **bike** as soon as possible. Going to University by train roundtrip is about ¥600, quite a lot considering it's only a 20-minute bike ride. A second-hand bike can be bought for a little over ¥5000, and can be rent for even less at some places. Ask plaza (which contains the office of the landlord) as soon as possible about rental bikes, and plaza might even have some free bicycles available (as we were encouraged to donate bicycles to plaza for future exchange students). Luckily, my roommates had already been in Kodaira for a semester so they were able to show me around and help me. I would have managed by myself too, but it

was just very convenient to have people around in my dorm to ask questions to.

Then there are numerous orientations at both the dorm and Hitotsubashi University. They will take you to the Kodaira City Hall to register for national health insurance and they will have you fill in application forms for a Japanese bank account. All these procedures are really easy and you are helped throughout. But... It's just a whoooooole lot of **paperwork** again. Prepare to write down your name on forms more than twenty times. I think there was even more paperwork after arriving in Japan than for the initial application. Me personally, I got really tired of it and it seemed there didn't come an end to it. As you can picture by now, if you really hate paperwork then perhaps you should choose another destination.

Fortunately, after a couple of days all of that administrative stuff is done and the classes start. During the first few weeks you can **attend all the classes you are interested in**, as to get an idea of which classes you want to take. I advise to check out as many classes as you can.

## Courses

Most classes at Hitotsubashi have a **small class size**: under 25 usually sometimes even around 10. This makes the classes very **personal** and there is a lot of interaction between the class and the teacher. Most classes have mandatory attendance and the **workload** is usually a lot **lower** compared to courses at ESE. Actually, the workload at Hitotsubashi was even lower than years 4/5/6 of VWO.

Hitotsubashi does offer Japanese courses, which you can also incorporate into your non-economic/econometrics credits. There is an intensive Japanese course with daily classes. This class was not so popular among the exchange students because the workload is huge. Even some students that were very motivated at the start dropped out of this class. Still, if you want to learn as much as Japanese as possible (and don't mind spending time on it) you should definitely try. Hitotsubashi also offers a '4-skills' class with two classes per week that was very popular. This class is taught entirely in Japanese using mostly pictures and gestures instead of English. I took this class for the first two/three weeks but then dropped out. In my opinion this class was quite fast-paced too. I dropped out because I was lazy and because I didn't like to move on to the next topic each time without mastering the current topic.

You can always study some Japanese yourself. I learned how to read hiragana and katakana, which you can learn in a week. The Japanese use katakana to write foreign words. So by reading katakana, you can at least understand a bit more of the world around you as those foreign words are English words.

I took the following courses at Hitotsubashi University:

- **Explore Japan Seminar** (4 ECTS, 2 Japanese credits):  
In this course, sensei (teacher) Jin Abe takes the group on different trips to teach about Japanese culture. The highlights were: a firework festival in Saitama prefecture, a sumo game (which I missed...), and spending a night in a ryokan (Japanese style hotel) complete with an onsen (Japanese natural hot bath). The whole group makes a book together about the activities. The only workload in this course is attending all the events (it's mandatory) and creating the book.  
All the exchange students want to take this course; it is the best course you'll ever have in University. Due to the high demand, a lottery was held and I was fortunate and got in.
- **Queer Theories** (4 ECTS, 2 Japanese credits):  
I had high expectations on this course. The course is about orientation in multiple ways such as sexual orientation and gender orientation. The course focused heavily on the writings of Sarah Ahmed, whose writings I really disliked. The teacher was very passionate, friendly, and knowledgeable. The teacher did lecture during the classes, but the majority of the time was spent on discussing the material with fellow students.  
We had to write three, rather short papers in total for this course. Not a heavy workload, but attendance was mandatory.  
With this course I was always in doubt whether I didn't fully grasp the ideas and concepts or whether the course was just quite vague/implicit. Perhaps I did not have enough prior knowledge about this subject or maybe I am used to courses being very explicit in Rotterdam.
- **Language and Virtual Reality** (4 ECTS, 2 Japanese credits):  
A very philosophical course on language itself and the way it creates a virtual world. Also about how language can change our perception of the physical world. The teacher likes to branch out a lot while talking and he

always comes up with interesting topics. Sometimes it was hard to follow due to his branching out and heavy nature of the course. Apart from mandatory attendance, there was one (again not long) final paper and a quiz in one of the classes. Again, low workload.

**The following courses count as Economics/Econometrics courses:**

- **Basic Seminar B: Value Investing** (4 ECTS, 2 Japanese credits):  
A course on value investing. A method of investing in stocks that was popularized by Benjamin Graham and made Warren Buffett rich. The concepts in this class aren't very difficult, but the teacher makes sure to ask difficult questions. This was one of my favorite classes due to the enthusiastic and amazingly knowledgeable teacher.  
There was quite some workload in this course. In a group of four you have to do multiple presentations and hand-in a final valuation of a company. Most of my study time in Japan was spent on this course.
- **Special Seminar** (4 ECTS, 2 Japanese credits):  
This course focused on causal inference. Less than ten people signed up for this class, so the lectures were very personal. I had learned almost all concepts before in my Econometrics courses but I did actually learn from the course. The teacher shows how all methods are used by researchers in published papers and this really helps to better grasp all the statistical methods.  
The workload was rather low. It consisted of some short weekly exercises and one presentation at the end.
- **Labor Economics** (8 ECTS, 4 Japanese credits):  
A course focusing on the economics of the labor market. Because I had taken microeconomics and macroeconomics in Rotterdam, this course is quite easy. It was my only course without mandatory attendance, so I have never been to a lecture.  
Workload was quite low. There were three assignments in total that did take some hours.

## Finances

When choosing a destination, I was worried about the costs of living in Japan. I wasn't sure yet if I would receive JASSO and in student reports I had seen huge expenditures. Because I received JASSO, I didn't worry about money at all. I did not try to be frugal. Therefore, you could spend less than I did monthly.

These are my estimates of my monthly expenditures:

Rent (including electricity and water): ¥15000< (+- €130)

Groceries and food: ¥40000< (+-€330)

Social life: ¥5000 (+-€41)

Mobile phone: ¥900 (+-€7,50)

Transport (varying a lot): ¥10000 (+- €90)



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¥70900 (+- €587)

The gym (one-time payment): +-¥5500 (+- €45)

Costs at arrival (towels, bed sheets, etc): +-¥10000 (+- €90)

Fortunately, the dorm rent in Kodaira is amazingly cheap. Vegetables and fruits are very expensive in Japan. As eating out in Japan (+-¥700) is relatively cheap compared to cooking, I went out for food for the majority of the evenings. For lunch I would usually eat in the cafeteria on Hitotsubashi campus. Some of my roommates were living on a tight budget and prepared their own dinner for +-¥250 per evening. This is possible if you don't mind eating rice with cheap instant curry, or rice with cheap fish. If you're planning on cooking the same meals as in the Netherlands, be prepared to spend even more on groceries and food than the ¥40000 I estimated. Also, western food such as pizza is very expensive.

Going clubbing is very expensive too. ¥3000/4000 for the entry only is common, at least for males. For women, it is always cheaper. I am not big on clubbing, so my budget didn't take a big hit. If you want to party cheaply, find international parties. There are also always parties or get-togethers in the dorm and 'Bring your own booze' is cheap as certain types of alcohol in Japan are actually cheaper than in the Netherlands.

Mobile phone contracts are cheap, but you usually need to know Japanese to sign up for them. Bring a Japanese speaker with you! I paid only ¥900 a month for 3GB data-only. I have never needed a Japanese phone number, so this was perfect.

Public transportation costs about the same as Dutch public transport. For example, round-trip to Shinjuku (downtown Tokyo) costs little over ¥1000 (+- €8). Some weeks I didn't go to 'the city' at all, and then other weeks 3 or 4 times. So these transportation costs can really add up.

Bottom line is that life in Japan **does not have to be very expensive**. If you decide to party in the dorm, eat a lot of rice, and don't use the train too much you wouldn't spend much more than you would in the Netherlands. But of course, you shouldn't be too worried about money during your exchange! And if you do receive JASSO then money shouldn't be much of an issue anyway.

## Daily life

I was very lucky to be placed with (5 other) amazing roommates. They became my best friends and really 'made' my exchange. In daily life I mostly hung out with them. We would have lunch at Uni together, go out to eat together, chat in the living room, go out for drinks, etc. Because of them I did not spend that much time with the other exchange students, even though they were great too!

Don't worry about your roommates. If you can't get along with them well or if they aren't very social then you'll just hang out with the exchange students. There were about a hundred Hitotsubashi exchange students housed at the Kodaira dorm. Enough people to find people you like, but also small enough to pretty much know everybody.

Some days at Uni were honestly pretty boring. Don't expect every day of your exchange to be super exciting, you will develop a daily routine wherever you go. I went to the dorm gym 2-3 times a week. I also really enjoyed going to the arcade and doing karaoke, both are cheap. Only in the last few weeks of my exchange I found out that going to maid cafes is a lot of fun too, I wish I could have gone more often. Short-term visitors to Japan can shop tax-free, so I did buy some nice clothes. I often went to Shinjuku by myself or did various

sightseeing trips in Tokyo alone. I enjoyed feeling the freedom of being by yourself in an enormous city.

What I really liked most about Japan is its people. The Japanese are fantastic people. They're friendly, courteous, and well-mannered. Even though Tokyo is huge, I have never felt unsafe. Even walking through back alleys was fine. You never bump into intimidating people. I had never realized how much 'on guard' I always was in the Netherlands until I got used to the safety in Japan.

What I did not expect before coming to Japan was that people barely speak English. I was thinking, 'Japan is a very developed country, so they must sort of know English'. Well, no. Most elderly people speak absolutely no English, and younger people usually don't grasp English that well or they are too shy to speak. English will not get you far in Japan, so I mostly used my limited Japanese and a whole lot of gestures.

If you made it this far into reading my student report, you must be really interested in going to Japan :). **Please send me an email or add me on Facebook if you have questions regarding anything!** I would actually really enjoy talking about Japan and this exchange so don't hesitate to contact me at all. Or if you see me at Uni, feel free to approach me! My email is: [daandeheij@gmail.com](mailto:daandeheij@gmail.com).

I wish you a pleasant exchange wherever you decide to go! Going on an exchange is the best thing to do, you have made the right decision! Although not always easy, it's a very rewarding experience in which you can develop yourself, get to know a new country, make international friends, and you'll have a story to tell your future kids.