

Semester abroad, report on experiences, summer semester 2022 Nagoya University of Arts (NUA)

My name is XXX and I am studying for Master in Integrated Design in the class School of Visual Combinations. In April 2022 I began my semester abroad in my 4th semester, in consultation with my course instructors.

Application and preparations

Despite the Corona pandemic, I applied for a semester abroad at the Nagoya University of Arts (NUA) at the beginning of 2021. This was particularly interesting for me because NUA offers an extensive range of courses in craftsmanship and design and I could therefore gain many new creative insights into graphics and typography. I originally planned to travel to Japan in the winter semester of 2021/2022, but unfortunately there were no entry permits for students due to the pandemic.

This led to the spontaneous lifting of entry restrictions for employees and students in Japan at the beginning of 2022. However, the trip would have to start in mid-March to early April. Due to the short-notice confirmation, the travel preparations were a bit chaotic. I had to acquire vaccination certificates for Covid-19 and rabies, long-term international insurance, Japanese SIM cards, accommodation, apply for a VISA credit card, find possible, additional funding for the stay abroad and much more. In general, however, I would recommend to start planning at least 4 months before travel to avoid stress.

I found the application for the semester abroad very easy to manage. First of all, you could apply to two foreign universities via the HfK, then after the application deadline you found out which university you could apply for. I had direct contact with the International Office and they provided good advice on financing, applications and credit point recognition. After I was accepted by NUA in Nagoya, two of their employees also contacted me. You always had the opportunity to ask questions, which happened quite often for me, given the amount of documents I needed to hand in.

Basic knowledge of Japanese is very helpful, as very few people in Nagoya and at the university speak or understand English. I was able to take online courses at the Hamburg Adult Education Center at the student rate, which were very helpful. There are also many practical YouTube videos and Duolingo for daily writing exercises. Even at the NUA, many lecturers do not understand English, but take the time to communicate with translations and, if necessary, gestures. On public transport in Nagoya you can get around with Google Maps and a little patience, but you can also get around very well by just communication in English.

My most important recommendations for language and manners in Japan: Learn the polite forms: "Please, thank you, good day and good evening, I would like" and "I am allergic to..." . Also learn to introduce yourself: "My name is..., I am coming from..., I am studying." And at least learn to read Hiragana (Japanese syllable type). You have to introduce yourself more often than you think. It also helps to watch popular children's series or anime with Japanese subtitles to get used to the language.

Also learn what things are not appropriate, for example eating or drinking while walking is not welcome because you could accidentally dirty the sidewalk or people. The same applies to

smoking; there are special areas for this in public places and on the university campus and much more.

Formalities

In order to avoid a panicked search for documents, I would recommend that all future applicants have several current passport photos ready, because sometimes they are needed on short notice for certificates and university ID cards. Due to the pandemic, there was also a Japan-specific PCR test and various apps that you had to download before traveling to Japan.

I would also only apply for scholarships or semester abroad grants directly after having received a definite approval. This also means that not all formalities have been dealt with or flights have been booked yet, as many institutions usually need several months to process applications. Personally, I worked for clients in Germany while studying in Nagoya because processing my foreign student loan application took more time. I would not recommend working (online) in Germany at the same time during your stay in Japan due to the study workload, but it is certainly feasible.

I am attaching a financial list below that lists all the fixed expenses we made in Japan so you can get an idea.

Traveling to Japan

Due to the Corona pandemic and the Ukraine war, there were changed flight routes, higher prices and additional, special entry requirements. In general, it is recommended to only buy the ticket for your flight when almost nothing stands in the way of your journey anymore. However, as a precaution, I would book a flight with the option to change, as unforeseen illness or other external circumstances could mean that you cannot take the flight.

My route took me via Hamburg to Frankfurt, from Frankfurt to Tokyo Haneda and from there to Nagoya. Before starting my trip, I had copied and printed out all important documents such as flight tickets, passport, Google Maps routes, address and telephone number of the university and employees, vaccination certificates and insurance certificates. I also saved them digitally in case of loss. I also downloaded the apps DeepL, Google Lens and Google Translator for communication, as my Japanese was not yet sufficient for understanding directions given in the language. If the pandemic is still relevant for flights, I would recommend choosing a flight that includes at least 3 hours of transfer between Tokyo and Nagoya, otherwise there is a high probability that you will miss the connecting flight and have to spontaneously continue your journey with the Shinkansen (express train). If the latter scenario happens, that's not so bad. The route from Tokyo Haneda to Nagoya, or Tokushige Nagoya Geidai, costs around 12,000 JPY (approx. 90€), there is free WiFi at train stations, Google Maps tells you exactly where you have to go and ticket counters offer English translations.

Accommodation

All foreign students were provided with accommodation near the campus by the Nagoya University of Arts. There was the option to choose a single apartment for 50,000 JPY or a double apartment for 35,000 JPY. Both apartment types have a "dormitory fee" of 25,000 JPY, which you cannot reclaim. The apartment complex is located directly opposite the small Tokushige Nagoya Geidai train station, so it could be a bit noisy at times, but it was bearable. I lived in a double apartment with a student from Great Britain. We had a shower tub and separate toilet, a spacious balcony, a kitchen-living room and two approximately 15 square meter bedrooms in our

apartment. The wardrobe was built into the wall, which divided our room and was therefore accessible from both sides. NUA has equipped the apartment with all the basics: WiFi, washing machine, refrigerator, microwave, knives, pots, scissors, bowls, sponge and dishwashing liquid, toilet paper, wet wipes and garbage disposal plans.

The place is about a 15-minute walk from Nagoya University of Arts. You just have to follow a main road straight ahead and you will pass many rice fields and a very friendly grocer.

NUA and therefore also the student accommodation are not in the centre of Nagoya but in Kita Nagoya, which is about 20 minutes from the centre by regional train. Kita Nagoya is rather quiet, surrounded by small restaurants, rice fields, convenience stores (Lawson, Family Mart and 7 Eleven) and family terraced houses.

General information about the partner university and academic life

Nagoya University is a very large university that is divided into two campuses. The Faculties of Art, Design and Literature are situated on the West Campus, Music, Singing and parts of Sculpture on the East Campus. Unfortunately, I missed the introductory week, but when I arrived I was greeted with a small care package with a campus map, a self-printed jute bag, sweets, instant rice and a list of cultural and artistic offers that were free for students.

A personalised timetable is created on site together with the NUA International Office and the lecturers. Both personal wishes and the number of credit points are taken into account. You also get the chance to try out various courses in the first two weeks and then decide on a suitable one. It didn't matter that I was actually studying graphic design, but wanted to take courses in interior design and painting. The only "required" course was a Japanese course for all levels. However, this was very difficult for beginners, but the lecturer did their best to support us in the learning process.

On the West Campus there are many workshops such as glass blowing, welding, pottery, wood construction, wood cutting, iMac pool, 3D printing, digital printing, model making and much more. These were also accessible to non-course participants. Most consumables such as paper, wood or clay could be used for free or purchased at a low price.

There is also a small creative shop on campus that sells pretty much everything an artist could need. Directly behind it is the "Art & Design Center (ADC)", where students and alumni are constantly exhibited, you can find information posters about local exhibitions and individual art objects or postcards are sold.

Last but not least, one of my favourite places on campus, the cafeteria. Every Tuesday to Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. there is a very large selection of warm dishes, five of which are always changing. You have a wide selection of soups, rice bowls and much more. However, an important observation is that there are not many vegan or vegetarian options. Prices vary between 350-600 JPY (around €2.50-5.00) per dish and often come as a set, ie. "Miso Katsu Don" – Miso Katsu (miso schnitzel on rice), miso soup, a cup for refillable water or green tea. The meals can be paid for with the rechargeable student card or by purchasing tokens in cash on site.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic and my short time studying for the master's degree, I had not been able to really experience the whole of the HfK as an institution, but I personally didn't feel as focused on creativity at the NUA compared to a German university. My courses, Japanese painting, visual design, Shodo (Japanese calligraphy) and Japanese, were structured more like a

school lesson in that you repeat what the teacher teaches. In addition, most students are very young, have just left school and still live with their families. At almost 26 years old, I was one of the oldest people. But that was also because, surprisingly, I could only choose bachelor's courses at the NUA.

Most of the courses I took focused more on design technique than on creative processes. This means that the Japanese painting course, for example, was more about me learning how to properly mix pigments and prepare frames. Lecturers did not pay much attention to my painting and its meaning. However, for me personally, I also found it nice to just try out new things and be able to adapt what I had learned to my future work. However, if you would like to have a lively creative exchange, it is best to speak to the students, who always continue to work on their projects after the courses. It requires basic Japanese knowledge, but most people were happy when I asked lots of questions about their work. In general, most people, students and lecturers at the NUA are incredibly warm people you can talk to at any time. Even with a translation app.

Every month the International Office at NUA held an "International Students Meeting" where students from abroad were updated about new events. We could dine together, plan trips, share concerns and worries and network with volunteer Japanese students.

The results of these meetings included, for example, a trip to Inuyama and the Kitanagoya Summer Festival, creative events with elementary school students at the NUA and an Exchange Student Exhibition in the Art & Design Center.

Public transportation

During the week you hardly have to use public transport as the university is very close to the student accommodation. However, if you want to go to the next larger mall or the centre of Nagoya, you have to rely on the local train, as the distance on foot or by bike would be a bit too far. A trip from Tokushige Nagoya Geidai to Nagoya Station costs 300 JPY. To avoid mistakes when buying tickets, I recommend buying a "Manaca" card from a ticket machine. These are available from just 500 JPY and can be easily recharged at all stations at the end of a journey. A Manaca card can be used in every city and on buses and trains.

NUA also offers to borrow bicycles from the university for a semester. To do this, you must take out traffic insurance at the university in advance. However, cycling from Tokushige Nagoya Geidai to Nagoya Station is not recommended because it would take an hour. Since summers in Nagoya can be extremely hot, on average around 34°C with very high humidity, everyone always preferred buses and trains.

If you want to go out on the weekend, keep in mind that the last train home leaves at 11:30 p.m. and the first morning train arrives at 5:25 a.m. In most cases this means you stay in Nagoya and take the first train home. There are Ubers and taxis, but they are very expensive and can cost around 8,000 JPY (around €55) at these hours.

I also went on trips to Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo together with other exchange students. Since Shinkansen are very expensive, we either took a JR bus or the JR Line ticket. The latter is a 5-ride ticket that can be used as a group ticket and only costs 12,000 JPY. With this ticket you can make as many journeys as you want on the JR line in one day and it is very well connected in Japan. Here in Germany that roughly corresponds to a "DB Quer-Übers-Land Ticket".

Problems and safety tips

Japan is a really safe country compared to Germany. Many people leave their wallets unattended in restaurants and children travel long distances on the train alone without any problems, but you should not be careless, especially as a female person in Japan. Sexism is also a very prominent problem in Japan. Catcalling and (offensive) sexual harassment are not uncommon, especially towards Gaijins (foreigners). For this reason, I would personally recommend traveling to places like Sakae as a couple at night, especially if you don't understand much Japanese and therefore are not able to perceive everything in your surroundings.

As a black person, I have also experienced racism, such as public insults, distancing and hyper-sexualisation, but for me these were associated with significantly less aggression and violence compared to Germany. There is very little education about the use of the N-word and cultural appropriation in Japan.

I would also recommend that anyone with darker skin and curly hair take care products and make-up from Germany because they are very difficult or impossible to find. However, there are small hairdressers run by Japanese people in Sakae and Inuyama who do braids, but this can easily cost €300.

Nagoya also gets incredibly hot and humid in summer, which is why sunscreen and sunscreen are an absolute MUST. Even the short journey of 15 minutes from our home to the university was enough for a heat stroke. You actually sweat while standing. If you're afraid of frogs, cicadas, mosquitoes or spiders, you won't have much fun between May and July, but it's manageable.

A valuable experience for a lifetime

For me personally, the six months in Nagoya and at the NUA were a valuable experience, as I was able to learn a lot about Japanese culture, but also about my own way of working. I would really like to go back to Japan, but I would probably rather go to a larger city like Osaka, as Nagoya quickly became uninteresting as a city for me. It was a lot of fun to get a taste of different creative disciplines, exchange ideas with people from different countries and learn a new language. It wasn't always easy, there were also very frustrating moments and a lot of miscommunication, but in the end I can look back on this time very happily.

In hindsight, I wish I had traveled more, had spoken better Japanese so that I could ask more questions of the people around me, but despite all of that, there was always at least one person in every course that I could talk to through Google Translator could entertain. The food was great, the other exchange students went from strangers to good friends and, above all, the visits to Osaka and Tokyo were very creatively inspiring. I was also able to find great new friends among the Japanese students with whom I was able to laugh and learn a lot. I can only recommend everyone to take on this journey. Just maybe make a plan of what you want to see and do, because six months of studying full-time goes by much quicker than you think.