

Hello, my name is Wout De Groof. I am currently a third year student at the Japanese Studies of KU Leuven. I am currently about halfway through my one year exchange at Kobe University. In this report I would like to inform people that have interest in applying for a similar exchange to Japan of my experience and the things I have learnt along the way.



First of all I would want to start by saying that Kobe, as a city is very well suited for an exchange student. Kobe has a variety of other exchange students, the warm people of the Kansai region and a location that has mountains, sea and a beautiful inner city all within a couple miles of each other.

When first arriving, the university provided me with the needed support to fill in all the paperwork. At first it was a bit difficult to live on my own, do my own groceries, laundry and all of the things everyone else does. Doing this is one thing, but doing this in a place you have never been before is another thing. Living abroad means adapting to a new normal. Everything you thought of as normal has now become different and this makes for an at first sometimes frustrating life, but when you get used to it, an experience that makes you grow as a person.

Another topic I want to touch on is becoming a foreigner. I had never considered how it must be to be different from the others in your environment. Even if you could speak the language better than locals, even if you would have grown up in a certain region, just by your looks and origin you get treated differently. This can be positive or negative, but one thing I can say is that in my experience, Japan is relatively one of the least discriminating places I have been to. Most of the times when I get weird looks on the bus or train, it is

people that are genuinely interested in why I am living here and speak Japanese to a certain extent.

Next I want to get into my experience concerning language learning and becoming friends with Japanese people. At first they might not seem so connected, but this is actually very different. I had gained most of my Japanese knowledge on my own by making use of a mass input studying method. I personally don't believe in studying grammar and practicing speaking the first years of studying. Coming to Japan I was bubbling with ambition to become friends and have interesting conversations with Japanese people. I thought this would be the perfect way to enjoy the fruits of my labor up until that point, while also improving my language proficiency by means of having deep bonds and conversations.

When actually arriving in Japan, this seemed to be a rather difficult task. Meeting Japanese people in a natural environment within the university was almost non existing thanks to having to take a big amount of Japanese courses, in which of course only exchange students participate. Even when having the rare opportunity of meeting a Japanese people in a natural environment, most people are very shy and not very talkative.

A lesson I learned from this is that contrary to meeting Japanese people in Belgium, I am now the foreigner with interest in their country, but this does not mean that every Japanese person has interest in foreign countries and their culture. With this I decided to look more for places where Japanese people that do have that interest gather. By doing so I managed to make some friends and finally start working on my dream of expanding my language proficiency to the next level.

This also had a catch to it. Most Japanese people in Kobe are born and raised in the Kansai region, and speak the Kansai dialect. When having a conversation with these people, they tend to speak standard Japanese, and refrain from using rather complex vocabulary. This really frustrated me and made me feel insecure about my Japanese abilities. Later on I realized that as I became better friends with them, this way of viewing me as a foreigner that isn't fully capable of understanding complex Japanese faded and I was able to get a step closer to my goals.

A final point concerning this topic 「活字離れ」. Even in a quite highly rated university like Kobe University, a lot of the students use a very limited vocabulary and have lost interest in reading books. This is a general trend seen across all of Japan's youth called 「活字離れ」, and this was something that I never considered. Of course there are a lot of students that do have a high level of literacy, but I felt like speaking to older generations contained more of the Japanese that I was so eager to learn.

My final advice for people considering applying for a similar exchange is, “just do it”. Life becomes a lot more interesting when you start challenging yourself and doing things outside of your comfort zone. This is where you gain knowledge and grow as a person way more than any textbook or professor could ever teach you.