

Final Report
Joint Study
Kansai Gaidai University
Hirakata (Osaka), Japan
Spring / Fall 2010
by Marius Schuessler

Participating on the *Joint Study* program of the University of Klagenfurt, I studied two semesters – spring and fall semester 2010 – at Kansai Gaidai University in Hirakata (Osaka), Japan. I decided to study in a foreign country because I like getting to know different countries, and I have already made the experience that, for me, living in a foreign country is connected with personal growth. Actually, Japan has been my second choice. But after all, I am glad to have come to Japan and Kansai Gaidai. It has been an enriching experience.

After having applied for the exchange at the University of Klagenfurt and finally having been accepted, the preparations began with the help of the partner university via internet. There was a special website for exchange students, and further e-mail reminders provided all necessary information that guaranteed a smooth procedure and a good preparation. Before leaving for Japan, one had to choose the place of living: at a dormitory ('seminar house'), at a host family, or finding a place on one's own. I decided to live in one of the seminar houses, where I eventually lived for the first two months. Accordingly, information concerning visa procedure, and other administrative affairs, have been provided.

Having arrived in Japan, the guidance was being continued equally well. A pick up service was offered that waited at the airport for the international students to arrive, and brought them to the seminar houses. This helped feeling some security in such a new and unknown, at first very irritating, surrounding. During the first week of the semester, administrative affairs were handled, starting from the welcoming, the course application, to the opening of a bank account, necessary payments, etc. The guidance performed by Kansai Gaidai and its staff was admirable and helped us getting a first orientation.

Those who were interested could apply for the speaking partner program, in which one was assigned to a Japanese student who served as a speaking or activity partner. Further, different activities, for which both international and Japanese students could apply, were offered at the beginning as well as throughout the semester. They made it possible to get to know the country, its culture and people.

The courses that were offered included mandatory Japanese language courses that were divided into different levels of difficulty and that were being taught in Japanese. Accordingly, there were courses from many various subjects. Thematically, they were all linked to Japan, and they were being taught in English by American teachers. The Japanese courses were held on a daily basis (except for the writing classes, which met three times a week), whereas the English classes met – with two exceptions – twice a week. About 5-15 students participated

on each of the language classes, up to 30 students participated on the rest of the classes. Like this, an ideal way of teaching and learning was guaranteed. Thus, it was possible to learn the Japanese language and to get some theory in accord with the experience one gained during the stay in Japan. Especially the language courses were all characterised by a high quality and a very good way of teaching.

About 600 international students study at Kansai Gaidai a year. Their course program is separated from the Japanese students' one. So is the building on the campus that is maintained mainly for international students. Nevertheless, it is possible to get in contact with Japanese students. Many of them want to get to know international students, too.

There are four seminar houses that are provided mostly for international students only. The distance from the campus is about 30 minutes by foot. They can be accessed easily and fast by bike. The seminar houses are being run by Japanese couples who are – as well as further Japanese students who serve as assistants – willing to help and guide the people living in the dormitories. The dormitories mostly consist of one room that is being shared by two people. Unfortunately, they are pretty expensive. These are two reasons that made me finally move out of the seminar house and move into a rent house in which two of my friends were living. This was possible; the rent for the seminar house, that was paid in advance, was transferred back to me.

Hirakata is by comparison a rather small city (population: 400.000), located in the Osaka prefecture which is a huge metropolian area. Hirakata is further located between the two big cities of Osaka and Kyoto, which can be accessed easily by train within half an hour and for a fair price. In general, there is a very good infrastructure; trains and busses are widely available and drive frequently. Using public transportation services thus is very convenient. Shops are located at every corner, and often they are open 24/7.

Studying at Kansai Gaidai has been very enriching for me. I was able to learn the language as much as possible; meanwhile, I am able to talk with a Japanese person, assumed the person I am talking to is willing to speak slowly and in simple Japanese. It was good to see that all courses were thematically connected to Japan. This helped my understanding of the country, its culture and people. It was a broadening of the horizon, especially because Japan has a culture and society that differs from ours in many ways (e.g. collectivistic vs. individualistic). Further, I was able to experience that the longer I stayed in Japan, the more I realized how less I understand the culture and people of this country. Thus, I also learned much about myself and about the society from which I come. All in all, the exchange has been a good and enriching experience I am very glad to have made.