

SEP Report

1. Student Information

Faculty/Major	Faculty of Science / Chemistry
Host University	Tohoku University
NUS Semester and Year of Exchange (eg. AY14/15 Semester 1)	AY15/16 Semester 2

2. Study at Host University

Please provide information on the academics at your host university:

- Studying or learning culture at your host university. How were classes conducted?
- What did you like most or dislike most about the academics at your host University?
- Advice on module registration and module mapping

I did my SEP under the Junior Year Programme in English (JYPE) that Tohoku University offered. Under JYPE, we had to take 13 credits for one semester, with at least 5 credits taken up by doing a mandatory Individualised Research Option (which is essentially a research project). JYPE is geared towards Engineering and Science students. Although all the courses offered under JYPE were conducted in English, there were only a limited number of courses and even fewer that would pertain to one area of study. For example, for Chemistry, there were only around 3 courses that were applicable for me (there were slightly more Chemistry options available, such as Introduction of Organic Chemistry, which Chemistry majors would thus be precluded from). That said, Tohoku University offers the most number of science-related courses in English comparing to other NUS' SEP Partner Universities in Japan. Students from the Faculty of Science should check out the options available and whether they have enough modules to map back to graduate on time.

Focusing on the academics, the Japanese Language classes that Tohoku University offers are rigorous and will definitely help you to improve your grasp of the language. They are less time-consuming as compared to the NUS equivalent, but well designed. At the higher levels, they offer classes such as Japanese Songs, where the Japanese language and culture are taught through traditional and contemporary Japanese songs. There is also a Japanese Culture class that I highly recommend because the field trips will really help you to understand the history and culture of Sendai a lot better. The Individualised Research Option enables you to choose a professor that you want to work under and to do a research project under that professor. Hence, your choice of professor is a key to whether you get a fulfilling time of research or not. My advice is to do some research on your choice of professor. Find out not only what area the professor specializes in, but also if he/she has their own lab, how often he/she is publishing papers and the focus of their current research. It may seem like a hassle, but it is necessary to ascertain that the particular professor accepts short-term international student.

For the rest of my credits, I took a hodge-podge of Engineering, Animal Science and Chemistry courses, because a lot of these courses were introductory courses. Taking classes that did not directly pertain to my major helped me to broaden my general knowledge and gain an appreciation for other areas of study. But that meant that I had to map most of my credits back as UEs, instead of them counting to my faculty requirements. Also, many of the courses were conducted in a seminar-style, with different professors coming each week to give a lecture about their own specializations in the field. While that helps to provide a very broad understanding of the field, and also helped to see what novel and current research was being done, it compromises on the depth of study and skims over the

SEP Report

fundamentals. Assessments wise, most of my assessments were either reports or presentations, which, for any NUS student, would be a breeze.

Overall, the allure of the JYPE programme lies not in the academic rigour, but in the breadth of the programme and the opportunity to do research (some of my friends even had the chance to be published). And of course the fact that no prior knowledge of the Japanese language is required.

Please list the courses that you took during SEP. (Please take note that the list of modules available to exchange students at the host university are subject to change. This table merely serves as reference.)

Host University			NUS Equivalent		
Module code	Course title	ECTS Credit	Module code	Course title	Modular credit
	Japanese 4	4	LAJ3741	Department Exchange Module	4
	Individual Research Training B	5	CM3288	Advanced UROPS in Chemistry 1	4
	Evolution of the West Pacific Arcs and Their Environments	2	GE1721	Department Exchange Module	2
	Introduction to Applied Animal and Dairy Science	2	FST2991	Exchange Enrichment Module	4
	Chemistry of Materials	2	CM4253	Materials Chemistry 2	4
	Geological Environment and Earthquake Disaster	2	GE3721	Department Exchange Module	2
	Japanese Culture B	2	JS2721	Department Exchange Module	2

2. Accommodation

What kind of accommodation did you stay in during your exchange (eg. on campus / off campus)?

Would you recommend this accommodation to future outgoing students?

Do you have any other suggestions?

During my time at Tohoku University, I stayed at one of the universities dormitories – Tohoku University International House Sanjo 2. I highly enjoyed my stay there and would definitely recommend it for all international students.

I have made a video detailing some of the differences between the four dormitories that international students are able to apply for, so hopefully that will be useful for future students who want to study at Tohoku University. (Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLvw8d6Vtpk>)

3. Activities during SEP

SEP Report

Were there any activities organized by school/student group/external organizations at your host university which you would like to recommend to other students?

Tohoku University has a surprisingly large number of groups that cater to helping international students out. @home organizes a lot of sports related activities for people to go to and make friends. A lot of locals, not just Tohoku University students, attend @home events too, so it is a chance to get to know a wider circle of people.

I would recommend activities organized by the Mori Group, which is a group of lovely ladies and gentlemen that aim to befriend international students. They are all slightly older people, and are all very motherly and fatherly figures. The Mori Group has a room called the Mori room on campus, that is opened on Mondays and Thursdays for international students to go to and have tea and some conversation. They are more than willing to help you out with any problem (including with Japanese homework). And if you befriend them, you may get invited out to other events, such as morning hikes, musical concerts, and so on.

There is also something called Free School, which occurs every Thursday from 7-9pm at the Sendai Support Centre (located close to the Disney store). This is not related to Tohoku University, but is something that is open for anyone and everyone to participate. It is opportunity for international students to improve on their Japanese and for the locals to improve on their English. For the first hour, the participants can only speak English, and then in the second hour, the participants can only speak Japanese. In this way, both international students and locals get to mutually help out other out and benefit from the process.

4. Cost of Living

Please provide an estimation of how much money you spent during your SEP?

Please list travel expenses separately.

Cost of living: 150,000 yen / month which includes:

- Rent and utilities (around 30,000 yen a month)
- Public Transport (I bought a concession pass, but you can also buy a bicycle, which would lower your public transport costs dramatically)
- Food
- Shopping

To be fair, my expenses per month were a lot higher than other international students. 100,000 yen a month would be more than enough.

I did a weekend trip down to Tokyo which cost me 60,000 yen (again, this amount would probably be a lot lower for other people, probably 50,000 yen would be enough for most), a large proportion of which was taken up by the cost of my Shinkansen tickets (11,000 yen one way).

SEP Report

5. Challenges

Did you face any challenging issues during your SEP stint? How did you overcome it/them?

If you do not know the Japanese language, you will find yourself floundering for the first couple of weeks. Sendai unfortunately is not the most English-friendly city in Japan. But the people there are lovely and will no doubt help you out as much as they can.

Another difficulty I faced was their public transport system, which is nowhere as convenient or as efficient as Tokyo's, or even Singapore's. If you choose not to buy a bicycle, you are pretty much reliant on the bus and subway system. Unfortunately, there is no subway station close by to the dormitories, so if you do not want to walk to school (a 40 minute walk), you need to really pay close attention to the bus timings because there is only 1 or 2 buses that come per hour.

The Japanese society is still very much a paper-society, so expect a lot of paperwork that you need to do – opening and closing of bank accounts, applying for a mobile phone plan, applying for your modules, essentially everything requires documents to fill in and submit.

One more surprising challenge is that you might not get the amount of interaction with local students as you might want. The JYPE courses are all taught in English, and most courses are offered only to international students. The language barrier might cause some clubs not to accept you in their activities. Also, my experience with the Japanese students is that they are generally unconfident of their English abilities and thus they shy away from speaking to international students. This all culminates into a lack of opportunities in general to make friends with local students, and thus I highly recommend either joining Free School, or a church, or making friends with people in your lab if you want that experience.

6. Overall SEP Experience

Please write one paragraph about your exchange experience and attach some photos that represent your exchange experience.

My exchange experience turned out to be better than I have expected it to be. I realized that I was a lot more independent than I thought I was. At the same time, I realized that I had a wonderful group of people from all nationalities that were more than willing to support me. I realized that the NUS branding is a lot more well-known than I had thought! Sendai is achingly beautiful. When the weather is good and the skies are blue, they will be the bluest skies you have ever seen. Known as the City of Trees (杜の都), there is greenery everywhere, something that a Singaporean would definitely appreciate. Sendai, although the biggest city in the Tohoku Region, feels nothing like other big cities in Japan such as Tokyo or Osaka. In Sendai, you actually have space to breathe. It may feel nowhere near as modern or happening as compared to Tokyo, but neither is it aiming to be that. There is a deliberateness with the slower pace of life here, where people have time to talk, to chat, to live. You would be hard-pressed to find a crowd when there is no festival going on, and even the peak hour trains feels very manageable. My time in Sendai felt very much like a vacation away from the hustle and bustle that we face back home. It was indeed the highlight of my undergraduate years and I

SEP Report

would not trade it for anything. I am forever grateful to NUS for giving me the opportunity to go overseas and to learn so much more the world and about myself.