**Guidelines for cultural exchanges with Japan**

Cultural exchanges, both for students travelling to Japan and for those hosting students from Japan, can provide a rich, cultural experience. Participating students not only gain an increased knowledge, understanding and appreciation of another culture and lifestyle, they also gain an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The most effective cultural exchanges are those in which students build personal relationships, often making life-long friends. Cultural exchanges also add a global perspective to the classroom curriculum.

Cultural exchanges can sometimes create cultural dilemmas for participating students, who may find themselves in new and confusing situations. This document has been developed to support participants and their families in developing an understanding of lifestyles and customs in Japan. Whether you are travelling to Japan or hosting a student from Japan, this information may help you gain the maximum benefit from the experience. The information provided is not exhaustive, and is intended as a guide only.

**Greetings**

Japanese people generally do not show their feelings as much as Westerners tend to do. They tend not to openly show affection or touch each other in public. When you meet someone for the first time it is appropriate to greet them with a bow or a hand shake. Generally a lower bow will indicate the respect that you have for that person’s status or age. Direct eye contact may be perceived as being confrontational, so it may be best to lower your eyes.

When adults meet in a formal situation, they may exchange business cards (*meishi*). It is a good idea to travel with a small business card holder. The *meishi* will be presented with both hands with the writing facing the receiver. When receiving a *meishi*, take it by the corners, with both hands, and take a moment to read it. Japanese people believe that how you treat the card is representative of how you will treat the presenter, so place it carefully in your business card holder. Placing the card in your back pocket or writing on it would be considered insulting.

**Names**

Japanese names are said with the surname first, then the given name. When referring to someone you will usually add *san* to their name. *Chan* is used for small children and *kun* for boys. The word for ‘you’ is quite intimate and should not be used when addressing people. Instead, the person’s name plus *san* should be used. In the case of a teacher, use *sensei* instead of *san*. *Sama* is a very polite form of *san*. 

*Exchanging business cards with two hands*
In the Japanese language there are no sounds for ‘l’, ‘th’, ‘q’ or ‘v’, so your name may be difficult to pronounce for a Japanese person if it contains some of these sounds. The Japanese language also puts a vowel after each consonant, except for a final ‘n’, so pronunciation may not be as you would expect, e.g. Shidonii for ‘Sydney’.

**Interactions (including non-verbal language)**

It is more important to Japanese people to reach a consensus as a group, rather than one person making a decision for the group. It is considered confrontational to say ‘no’, or to refuse directly. Instead of this, hesitation, making vague comments or avoiding eye contact are seen as a more appropriate way of refusing an invitation or expressing disagreement.

Japanese people do not like to openly disagree, so rather than saying ‘no’, will say ‘Let me see...’ or some other non-committal phrase. If the answer is not a direct ‘yes’, the intention is probably ‘no’. Also, ‘yes’ may mean, ‘Yes, I’ve understood what you said’, rather than ‘Yes, I agree.’

There are many non-verbal gestures in Japanese, such as pointing at your nose to indicate ‘I’ or ‘me’. Beckoning to someone is indicated by waving with the hand facing down, rather than upwards as it is in English.

Yawning in public is considered impolite in Japan. If it is unavoidable, cover your mouth with your hand. It is also considered rude to blow your nose in public. Most Japanese will just sniff instead of blowing.

**Housing**

**Shoes**

Japanese people take off their shoes and put on slippers when they enter a house. Shoes that have been worn outside will dirty the house, so are left inside the front door, in the entrance hall. Shoes should be lined up neatly and faced outwards so they are ready to be slipped on when you leave. Slippers are worn inside, except in rooms with tatami (straw matting) or in the toilet. Special slippers are placed outside the toilet and should be worn in the toilet, and not anywhere else in the house.

School students wear one pair of shoes to school, then change at the school entrance to indoor shoes. They put their outside shoes in a locker. A third pair of shoes is worn for PE, and separate wooden clogs are provided for the toilet, which is usually a traditional Japanese toilet.

**Bedroom configuration**

Traditionally, Japanese sleep on futon. Futon are thin, folding mattresses that are taken out of the cupboard each evening and spread on the tatami matting, then packed away in the morning. Thus, the room could be a living room in the daytime and a bedroom at night. Nowadays, many Japanese sleep in Western-style beds, but as houses are smaller, each child probably doesn’t have his or her own room. As a guest, you may be given someone else’s room.
**Bathing**

Japanese people use the bath to soak in, rather than for washing themselves. The bath is square, deep and hot and all members of the family use the same water. Before using the bath, you sit beside it on a small stool and take water out of the bath with a dipper to wash yourself. After you are sure that you are clean and rinsed, you soak in the bath. Many houses now have hand held showers which are used instead of the dipper. The same rules apply when taking a public bath. In a public bath each person has a small, thin towel that they use to wash their body outside the bath. They then take the towel into the bath with them, keeping it on their head so as not to dirty the water for others. They use the same thin towel to dry themselves after they have bathed. Older people like going to the public bath as a social occasion. Japanese people take a bath at night for relaxation. They usually do not shower or bathe in the morning.

**Toilets**

There are three sorts of toilets in Japan – traditional, modern and hi-tech. Traditional toilets are at ground level and you squat over them. You place one foot either side of the bowl and face the hood at the front. Modern toilets are Western-style. Some toilets also have a basin and tap built on to the cistern. This means the clean water used to fill the cistern can be used to wash your hands first.

In schools and stations most toilets will be traditional Japanese-style. Sometimes toilet paper is not provided, so it is a good idea to carry tissues with you. In department stores you will find both traditional and Western-style.

Hi-tech toilets have buttons that control the seat temperature, flushing strength, flushing sounds and bidet facilities that will wash and dry you. Japanese people sometimes feel uncomfortable if they don’t use a paper, flushable toilet seat cover when using a public toilet. If music does not play automatically when entering the cubicle, some Japanese people like to flush the toilet to cover any sound they may make.

**Eating and drinking**

Japanese people traditionally eat with chopsticks. Do not point with them, move dishes around with them, stick them in a common bowl of rice or pass food from chopsticks to chopsticks. When serving food from a common plate, do not use the ends of the chopsticks that have been in your mouth, just as you would not put a fork that has been in your mouth into a common plate of food. Before eating, you should say *itadakimasu* (I humbly receive this food) and after finishing, *gochisoosama* (It was a feast). It is polite to try everything you are served, but it is not necessary to eat everything on the plate. When eating at home, it is most common for the mother to do all the shopping, preparation, cooking and cleaning for meals. Japanese mothers tend to shop every day for the ingredients for the evening meal.
When eating out, you should be aware that some things are very expensive, and should therefore avoid ordering them. Japanese people make a slurping noise when eating noodles, but not with other foods or drinks.

**Clothing**

When visiting Japan, clothing should be conservative and it is a good idea to take your school uniform for school visits and formal occasions. It is not appropriate for girls to wear singlet tops or shorts, or to expose their stomach. Slip-on shoes are recommended in addition to your other shoes, because Japanese do not wear shoes inside the house and when visiting temples and shrines. In winter, layers of clothing are best, as transport, shops and houses are generally well-heated. Japanese mothers tend to do the laundry every day, so it is not necessary to take large quantities of clothes.

**Families**

Japanese mothers have control of the home and family budget, as fathers are often away at work for long hours. If staying with a Japanese family, you may not see your host father very much. Sometimes mothers will not have their dinner until the father gets home from work. Japanese boys tend to be quite spoilt and their behaviour towards their mother and grandmother may seem rude to you. Boys and fathers do not generally help with chores around the house or cooking.

**Schooling**

Japanese students have very little choice regarding the subjects they study. Traditionally all schools in Japan offer the same subjects. Students attend elementary school for six years, and junior high school and senior high school for three years each. Students belong to a home room class, which may have as many as 50 students. Students stay in the one home room classroom and different teachers come to teach them during the day. In high school, lunch is usually eaten in the home room. In elementary school, most schools provide lunch in the school dining room. A Japanese high school day has 6 x 50 minute lessons, with a 10 minute break between each one. Some schools have classes and club activities on Saturdays. After school each day during the week, most students participate in club activities, which might be social, sporting or cultural. Uniform is very strict and girls are not allowed to wear jewellery or make-up. Teachers are generally respected in Japanese society. They dress quite conservatively and formally.

**Gift-giving**

Japanese people send gifts in the middle of the year and at the end of the year to business colleagues, teachers, doctors and people who have done favours for them. The biggest celebration in Japan is at New Year, when families get together and feast.
on special seasonal food and visit shrines and temples. Children receive New Year’s money, *otoshidama*, from parents and relatives. Japanese people do not traditionally celebrate Christmas as we do, exchanging gifts etc. Even so, Christmas has become a commercial event, with Santa and presents in stores to encourage people to shop. Japanese people like to show generosity and warm hospitality towards guests. They often show this by giving gifts to guests, without expecting anything in return. When Japanese people travel, they are obliged to bring back souvenirs for family, relatives, friends and business colleagues. It is traditional to be very humble about the quality of the gift being given. There is no requirement to open the gift straight away.

If you are staying with a Japanese family it is advisable not to admire things in stores, or the family might buy them for you, which can become embarrassing. When travelling to Japan, it is a good idea to take many small gifts to give to your school friends, family members and other people who help you during your stay.

**Visiting places of worship**

If you wish to enter a temple or shrine, you will be asked to take off your shoes and carry them with you in the plastic bag provided. Temples are Buddhist and most funeral services in Japan are Buddhist. Shrines are *Shinto*, Japan’s indigenous religion which fosters respect for nature. The entrance to a shrine is marked by a *torii* gate. Happy events such as births and marriages are usually *Shinto* ceremonies.

**Religion at home**

Some homes have a *butsudan*, which is a Buddhist altar where families may chant or pray to departed ancestors. There are often offerings of rice cakes, mandarins, and sake rice wine for the departed relatives.

**Levels of formality**

If you are a language student you may notice that young people use an informal level of language amongst themselves, whereas language used when talking to older people and teachers is more formal.

**Manner and demeanour**

Young Japanese people may be less likely to express their opinions than their Western counterparts. They may spend more time in their room alone than you are used to doing. If you are hosting a Japanese student, it might be a good idea to include them in your family activities by looking at photos together, playing games and going for walks in the neighbourhood.

**Time**

Japanese people are usually very punctual: functions start and finish on time, to the extent that the end of a function may seem quite abrupt. Trains also run on time, so if you are late you will miss the train.
**Transport**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taxi doors in the rear of the car are opened and closed automatically by the driver, who usually wears white gloves.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Train tickets are bought at vending machines in the station, whereas you usually pay for the bus when you board or exit. Peak hour services can be very crowded, so it is best to avoid these times if you can.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trains are kept very clean. People are very quiet and considerate when on public transport, and tend to avoid eating snacks or talking on mobile phones.</td>
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**Shopping**

| Japanese people love to shop, and families will often go to shopping centres on weekends. You will notice that everything is beautifully wrapped and packaged. A good place to buy souvenirs and small gifts is the 100 yen shop. Generally you pay the listed price in Japan, and do not bargain. |

**Concept of ‘saving face’**

In Japan it is important to consider the other person’s point of view and allow them to save face by not disagreeing, even if their opinion may seem unreasonable to you.

**Writing system**

| Japanese writing uses a combination of characters (kanji), hiragana and katakana. Hiragana is used for verb endings, particles and words of Japanese origin, whereas katakana is used for words borrowed from other languages, e.g. Shidonii (Sydney) would be written in katakana. Traditionally Japanese was written from top to bottom, right to left across the page, but now it is very common to write across the page from left to right as we do in English. Many Japanese signs are now written in English as well as Japanese. |