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# Midterm Report

Fukuoka, March - September 2025

Special Focus: Kaizen in modern Japan

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## Introduction

I first want to thank the SJCC for this wonderful opportunity to be supported during my year in Japan. I want to start this midterm report by outlining my motivation and background.

I chose to apply to this scholarship because I had a fascination with Japanese culture since I was a child and met a Japanese au-pair in my small village who taught me origami. Since then I visited the country three times and started learning the language. I visited the country for the first time in 2019 for two weeks and my visits kept getting longer, I stayed three weeks in Japan in 2022 for a conference in Kanazawa and learned diving in Okinawa afterwards. I then received a fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science to research for three months at Tohoku University in Sendai until finally undertaking this year-long experience. Before I lived in Sendai, I took a Japanese N4 course for a semester at the University of Zurich but otherwise I've always taught myself Japanese. However, I got allocated to a Japanese tandem partner who was doing an exchange at ETH University and we became close friends and talked Japanese and German weekly. I can highly recommend partaking in a tandem programme or using an app to connect with native speakers to prepare for your stay in Japan. I kept being drawn to Japan and hopefully this year will be the culmination of all my past efforts to experience and live this beautiful culture.

My personal background is very varied, but the red thread is that I have always done a lot of things in different countries. I'm more of a generalist than a specialist and this paid off since generalists are more common in the Japanese workforce. Most salarymen and salarywomen are trained across different departments in Japanese companies. Instead of focusing on one role at first, they get an understanding of how the overall company works. I have always been quite fascinated by Japanese work culture, especially after hearing about a concept called Kaizen. After observing Kaizen in my internship, I was curious to research it more and implement it in my own work life. For this reason, Kaizen is the special focus of this midterm report. I wrote about my own work experience, conducted interviews and analysed research papers to find out if Kaizen is still relevant in modern Japan. I hope this midterm report gives the reader a motivation to also undertake a year in Japan and to discover and learn more about my experience here as well as the concept of Kaizen.

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# 1. Part 1: Personal Experience

## 1.1 Preparation

As soon as I found out that I received the scholarship, I started the preparation for the year ahead. After reading many scholarship reports, it was clear that being prepared will make the year a lot better. I highly recommend to anyone receiving this scholarship to research accommodation, language school and the job market thoroughly.

### Language School

I started researching language schools in Fukuoka in November and found the website of Meiji Academy very informative and nice. I especially liked that the school offers full flexibility, every Monday a new course can be started and the classes are small. I took a placement test and was told I had N4 level and could start in March. However, since my aim was taking the N2 exam, I tried to get into an N3-level course after insisting that I would study hard until March. They agreed but said that I have to proceed with a higher level course at my own risk. I was told I could start my course on the 24th March. I paid the invoice for a 3-month course which can be extended to 6 months with a discount if I wanted to continue studying there. This was nice to keep my options open.

### Apartment Hunting

I started very early to look for an apartment in Fukuoka, it was not easy because I wanted to live with my partner and the school and many agencies didn't offer a double bed in furnished apartments. I also realised that normal apartments are not possible to rent because most are only for long-term stays of 2 years. I contacted some real estate agencies to get estimates but the issue was that many apartments were too small for two people or too expensive. In the end, I discovered monthly and weekly mansion websites where we found a perfect apartment close to the sea and the city centre in Fukuoka in December and paid all the rent in advance for 6 months and we were ready to move in in March.

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## Visa Procedures

I was very lucky that I have Swiss and German citizenship and it was the last year for me to apply for the working holiday visa. I submitted my application in November and on 30th November the Munich consulate confirmed my application and I picked up my visa on 4th December. The visa allowed me maximum flexibility of working and going to school for one year without having to worry about getting a work visa or having to leave the country to renew a tourist visa. It even allowed me to visit Korea twice with a re-entry permit.

## Job Search

I started looking for potential employers to apply to in November and identified members of the SCCIJ that interested me and asked to be connected with them. I also asked Japanese friends and former co-workers for help. Sadly, none of the companies I got connected with were looking for anyone or had capacity to train someone for an internship. I tried to apply to local jobs myself and intensified my job search around May.

## 1.2 Arrival and Life in Japan

In order to open a bank account and have a phone contract, one needs an address first in Japan so I was glad, I found a furnished apartment before arriving.

### Fukuoka City Life

The reason I chose Fukuoka as my location was that the city has seemed like the ideal city to me for years. It has approximately 2 million inhabitants which makes it a mid-sized city but it offers everything the bigger cities have to offer but with fewer tourists and a more relaxing environment. I always loved the sea so living only 5 minutes away from it was a dream come true. I also appreciated that Fukuoka is close to the rest of Asia and I was able to fly to Seoul for a friend's wedding within one hour. However the distance to the major Japanese cities like Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka wasn't ideal and I often felt like missing out on events and networking opportunities. I tried my best to visit though and built a really good network in Fukuoka. People in Kyushu are a lot friendlier than in some other prefectures

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and also speak less English which gave me a great opportunity to connect with locals and practise my Japanese on a daily basis.

### **Bank account & PayPay**

I knew I needed to get a Japanese bank account as soon as possible to receive the scholarship payment and future wages. The only bank that accepted me based on my residence status was Japan Post Bank which also has convenient apps to register and check your balance. These are however completely in Japanese. It also took some time for the necessary documents to arrive via post. So far I've been happy with the bank account but one won't be able to have a debit card in the beginning and I got a Revolut debit card for convenience.

However, the most important and vital application I can recommend is PayPay. It is the most convenient payment app that can be used nearly everywhere and is similar to the Swiss application Twint in the way that you can also use it to send money to friends and pay online. You can even collect points and those can be converted into payment.

### **Phone contract**

I highly recommend getting a Japanese phone number although first getting an e-sim might seem cheaper or more convenient. For many administrative things and cultural experiences in Japan, a phone number is needed. It also lets you access apps in this region that might not be available in your home country (some German friends couldn't download the most popular Japanese messaging app Line). I decided on a phone contract with Rakuten which was incredibly cheap and based on the individual's internet usage and one can either choose a sim card or an e-sim with this contract.

### **Travel**

I am a big fan of travelling and exploring local culture. Having travelled to over 60 countries and over 25 prefectures in Japan, my aim was to explore Kyushu after having explored all prefectures in northern Japan. Fukuoka is a wonderful base with great connections and I tried to travel at least on two weekends per month. During the first half of my scholarship I visited Tokyo, Wakayama, Mie, Osaka, Hyogo, Saga, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, Oita, Nagasaki and Kagoshima prefecture. I'm not writing this to brag, but to encourage the reader to

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travel as much as they can if they find the time and financial sources to do so. It will help to broaden the horizon and help understand Japanese culture and customs even better.

Here is a map showing all the best Kyushu destinations that I can recommend:



### **SJCC Events & Networking**

I knew that I wanted to network and connect with locals while in Japan. Many SJCC events took place in Osaka and Tokyo which are quite far away, but I still managed to go to two big events in these cities to network and socialise with fellow scholars, other immigrants and Japanese locals. The first month I arrived in Japan, I printed 100 business cards with simple contact information. Business cards play an important role in Japanese work culture and I wanted to be prepared to hand my cards out at any opportunity. I'm happy to report that I have less than half of the cards left and hope to hand out more in the second half of my scholarship year

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I went to the Swiss Alumni Sakura Event in April which also was the first day of the Osaka Expo. I connected with other current scholarship holders such as Robin, Vanessa and Anju, and other former scholarship holders which was a great opportunity to exchange experiences and forge future connections. The food was delicious and the presentations were very interesting. I also liked learning about the Swiss Pavilion at the Osaka Expo.



Swiss Alumni Sakura Event in Osaka

I also went to the Swiss Young Professionals event where I was even asked to hold a speech about my scholarship experience. I connected with more people at this event because I had a clearer strategy to hand out my business cards and wanted to get to know people in a more relaxed way than at the last event where I put high expectations on myself. I also met a lot more scholarship alumni and members of the Swiss embassy, the Swiss Club Tokyo, Swissnex and, of course, the SCCIJ. I made really good friends that I'm still in touch with.



SJCC Swiss Young Professionals Gathering #38 in Tokyo

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I also attended a Google startup event in Tokyo since I worked in the tech industry before and wanted to connect more with people in the tech scene in Tokyo. Since I am interested in potentially founding my own business in the future, I thought it was a good idea to network in that industry as well.



Google Startup event at the Tokyo Campus

In Fukuoka, I went to language exchanges with the local companies and organisations such as Hakatamingle101 and Smiley Flower. I met many friends there and sometimes spoke Japanese for 5 hours straight which helped a lot to improve my comprehension and speaking skills. The school also had regular exchange and networking events and I made many Japanese and international friends there.



Hakata Mingle and Smiley Flower Hanabi Event

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### **1.3 Language School Experience**

The language school was located very centrally so I could walk there within 25 minutes. During the first few months I was only with one other person in class which gave me the opportunity to speak a lot and get a very intensive Japanese immersion. The teachers were all very friendly and helped me out when I had any issues. The students were mostly North American or European but I also made friends with Taiwanese, Singaporean, Chinese and Australian students.

My curriculum followed the second Genki book and later Quartet 1 and 2 which are N3 and N2 level respectively. I had three or four hours of school a day (depending on the class size) either in the morning or afternoon. The morning classes started at 9am and the afternoon classes at 1:10pm. This way I could still study on my own, join cultural events or do short trips close to Fukuoka in my spare time.

The rest of the week was filled with cultural experiences I could participate in and language exchanges with Japanese people around Fukuoka. I especially enjoyed the Smiley Flower and Hakata Mingle events to connect with local people.

### **1.4 JLPT preparation and exam**

I decided to take the JLPT N3 exam in July 2025 so that I would be well-prepared for the JLPT N2 exam. My aim was to have an extrinsic motivation to study Japanese with great focus and to figure out how exactly the exam procedure works. Since I had up to 4 hours of school every day, I got a lot of practice already, but I teamed up with friends who were also studying for the exam a few times a week in cafés to study more intensively. I can highly recommend the Shin Nihongo series to practise for the exam with exam style questions and the app Migji as well as the WaniKani website for Kanji. The exam went well but I won't know the result until September and will focus now on getting a good score in the N2 exam in December 2025. I noticed that I struggled the most with grammar and listening in the N3 exam so I will mostly focus on improving these skills.

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## 1.5 Work Experience

In May I had an interview and got accepted as a marketing and PR specialist at Amniscor. After successfully passing the interview, I started my internship in June. Since I had prior experience in B2B sales and customer relations, I adapted quickly to my role but still learned a lot, especially about Japanese and international public relations.

My daily tasks include researching and contacting different agencies, universities and governmental organisations around the world to partner with or advertise the company. I am able to speak and write in Japanese, French, English and German and therefore practised my language skills a lot. I also got involved in the marketing team and contributed to social media content such as filming and preparing videos as well as creating posts. This is quite new to me and very exciting since I could get creatively involved. I really enjoy the balance between talking to international companies and organisations as well as using my creative skills to market the company to potential clients.

It was quite difficult at times to communicate with Japanese colleagues and to use Keigo correctly, but I was trying my best to improve. I also took business classes at the language school to be aware of business etiquette and to communicate more efficiently. It has been a very interesting opportunity so far and I am very grateful to my international and Japanese colleagues to have made my work environment a very pleasant experience in such a foreign country with a very different work culture.

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## 2. Part 2: Kaizen

### 1. Introduction

I have always been fascinated by how efficient and detail-oriented Japanese businesses seem. I have vaguely heard about the term Kaizen in Switzerland since some companies sent employees to Kaizen workshops to improve business processes. Kaizen (改善) is a business philosophy of continuous small improvement in the business environment instead of sudden drastic changes. Kaizen is a more digestible way to introduce small changes that can have a big impact in the future. “Kai” (改) means change while “Zen” (善) means for the better (Imai, 1986).

Kaizen was initiated as a response to industrial problems and limitations faced in Japan after WWII. Kaizen is not only about finding a simple solution to a problem but tries to continually improve further after achieving goals (Radović-Marković, 2024). It is therefore a process rather than a final destination of business improvement (Barraza et al, 2025). The Japanese manufacturing company Toyota Corporation was the first to implement Kaizen. Its roots can be traced back to a Japanese team working at Toyota to prevent problems after World War II. These teams of employees were referred to as Quality Circles. Masaaki Imai popularized kaizen in the West with his 1986 book *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* (Ansho, 2024). Any employee can initiate the Kaizen process at any point and everyone in the company is encouraged to constantly strive for the better.

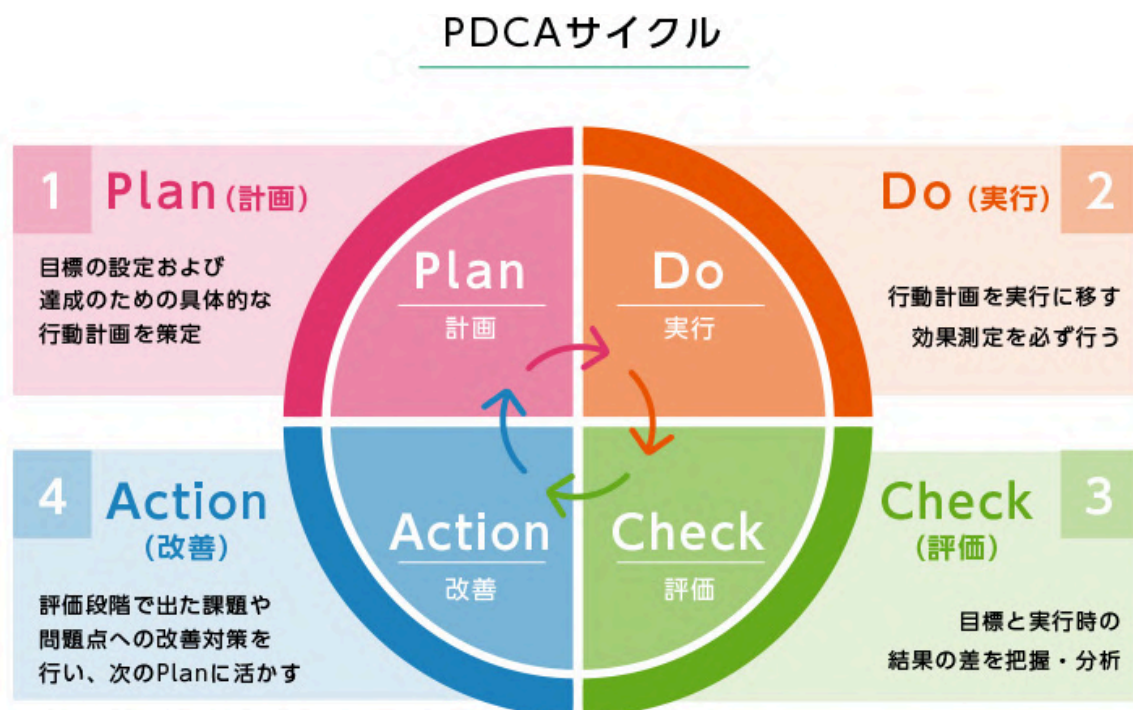
In order to understand Kaizen better, I present three parts: My personal experience, case studies of people working in Japan across different industries and by analysing research papers about the relevance of Kaizen in modern Japan. Through these three methodologies, I hope to gain a better insight and hopefully help the reader to understand Kaizen better.

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## 2. Kaizen in my internship

When I started my internship, I was surprised by how organised everything was. Each position at the company had a clear purpose. The resources and information were organised in a software to make sure everyone finds everything they need to perform their job well. When I mentioned this to a co-worker, he found this really funny since this was only a recent phenomenon that was implemented by him and another co-worker.

One aspect of Kaizen is that everyone at any hierarchy level at the company is supposed to aim for improvement to make the whole company run smoothly. This bottom-up approach ensures that those who know the most about their expertise can introduce small changes which lead to bigger improvement in the future to achieve long-term goals. For example, in my company, SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) were introduced to ensure a fluid knowledge transfer, this was something that was missing recently and led to a lot of gaps of knowledge when new talent was hired or someone was unsure about a procedure. The problem was identified and SOPs were created and they are constantly updated and checked and then improved which is part of the PDCA circle shown in the graph below.



The Plan Do Check Act circle of Kaizen, a four-step technique used to solve business problems (Fujifilm, 2023)

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Furthermore, continuous improvement plays a big role in ensuring that everyone in the PR and marketing is aware of how to use the databases with important client information. In the beginning, they were all in one excel file that was shared and updated manually. However, a co-worker compiled databases and added them to the cloud software so that everyone has constant access and they can be updated in real time. Useless information was removed and the databases are constantly checked for issues that can lead to time-consuming errors. I suggested adding an automated system that renews the date automatically when clients are communicated with. This way errors were avoided and a working step was removed which led to saving time and improving the process. This way we also noticed that there were some discrepancies in the dates that were manually added.

Another example is how the marketing procedures were simplified and stream-lined by a co-worker. In the past, videos and photos for social media were saved on individual laptops and media files were very disorganised. However, the marketing and media manager created a cloud-based video database with information about location, date, purpose and cross-references to previous media material so that anyone who uploads or edits videos can access information immediately. Everyone involved has to constantly update and check these resources to make sure that everybody is on the same page. As a result, posting to social media became a lot easier and less time-consuming for everyone in the marketing team.

These examples show how efficiency can be improved with simple steps by individuals in various roles. However, initiative has to be taken by individuals and problems have to be identified at the root in order to successfully implement a Kaizen process. It is a continuous circle and everyone has to be motivated and engaged enough to make it work. If employees are too overworked or don't have the energy to improve things, the PDCA circle could quickly fall apart from my observation.

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### 3. Case Studies

I interviewed several people in Japan about how Kaizen impacts their work. Most of them wanted to keep their name, specific location and company name anonymous so I anonymised all responses to not distract from the main message. Although the sample is small in this qualitative study, I gained many new insights and learned a lot about Japanese business culture by talking about this topic to people from various backgrounds.

The first person I talked to was a young woman (28 years old) who works for one of the biggest architecture firms in Japan in the Aichi prefecture. She said that Kaizen plays a big role and is naturally adapted in everyday business processes. She gave a concrete example of how the ventilation systems were adapted during COVID times, and how specific structural systems for earthquake damage prevention after the big 2011 earthquake in Fukushima impacted architectural practices. In architectural exams, future architects are expected to have timely knowledge and update and adapt it according to societal situations. She thinks those are some of the examples of how Kaizen is used in the architectural community in Japan.

I also interviewed a former bank worker (72 years old) from Saga prefecture about how Kaizen was implemented in his bank. He said that he knows about the concept but it wasn't used at his bank. He thinks it is mainly used in factories or manufacturing businesses, specifically Toyota came to his mind, but it was not really used where he worked. It is an important concept and relevant for improving systems efficiently but he doesn't see how it could be used outside of an industrial context. He also noted how it probably improved the Japanese economy after WWII and how the impact was felt across different industries.

I asked a Fukuoka city ward worker (56 years old) about how Kaizen is used but he said they don't really use it. He found the meaning of the word Kaizen interesting and said that it is very specific and can't be used to talk about improvements in other areas, but only for certain processes specifically related to improving manufacturing or business processes. He said that he also tries to use Kaizen in his personal life because he likes the concept of improving small aspects to have improved life quality. For example, he introduces new habits slowly into his life such as exercising or taking care of his hobbies.

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A 38-year-old mechanical engineer from Tokyo said that Kaizen plays an important role in the engineering and manufacturing of products. He works at one of the leading technology firms in Japan and he said his superiors often show Kaizen processes visually. He drew a flowing river to show how small issues can block the flow and how by removing these obstacles can de-block the river and not lead to catastrophes or floods in the long-term. He said that even small details in engineering need to be updated and improved constantly to ensure the quality of the output. This was an especially fascinating way to think about Kaizen to me and the visual aid really shows how Kaizen is about risk prevention in many businesses.

A 34-year old dental assistant working at a hospital in Oita prefecture said that she knows about Kaizen, but in her work it was only mentioned when she was in her trainee period. She was advised how to improve simple mistakes she made regularly and tried to avoid them in the future. Especially dealing with sensitive equipment made her very careful in avoiding mistakes and ensuring that patients receive the best treatment. She also mentioned Toyota as a prime example for Kaizen and how she learned about it during her time at university. She thinks Kaizen is important but was probably more important in the past. She finds the concept of Kaizen inspirational and agrees that small changes over time can lead to big improvements. She has made these observations in her personal life as well.

A 25-year old man working in Sales at a mid-sized company in Fukuoka prefecture mentioned that it is important to implement Kaizen when dealing with clients. He tries to continuously improve his approach and make sure clients are satisfied with his service. He also mentioned that Toyota and the automobile industry came to his mind when he heard of Kaizen and said that it is used differently in his company where he has to make sure to reach sales targets and build good relationships with his clients. He tries to implement it nevertheless and says it was mentioned during meetings before to make sure sales pipeline processes run smoothly and make sure the inventories. He mentioned a 'Just in Time' inventory strategy that is often used that allows management to reduce excess inventory by matching the delivery of raw materials from suppliers with production schedules.

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#### **4. Relevance in modern times**

Kaizen seems to still be a relevant term in big and small businesses as well across different industries in Japan. However, Kaizen seems to be perceived as a manufacturing based system rather than being present in the service industry or the public sector. Many of the interviewees connected the term to Toyota. The car manufacturing company seems to have really made an impact with its Kaizen system to immediately come to mind for many people. An interesting observation was that even if the interviewees did not use a Kaizen system in their work life, they all knew what it was and some even mentioned how it has an impact on their own life and how it is an important concept in Japanese culture. Apart from conducting interviews, I also consulted research papers about the relevance of Kaizen in modern Japan.

Many papers conclude that Kaizen is not a solid concept but is rather fluid depending on circumstances within an organisation. Kaizen evolves uniquely within each company, following changes to the company's business environment. Detailed implementations vary considerably between organisations (Kalansooriya, 2023). The impact of Kaizen also seems to have an impact on personal life in modern Japanese society. Two interviewees mentioned that they try to implement it in their own personal life. Some research papers argue that Kaizen has deep historical roots which go back to the Edo period (Dahlgaard-Park, 2000; Fujimoto, 1997). The emphasis on social order, the hierarchical social structure, and the establishment of an advanced bureaucracy to run the nation are all indications of the Edo period's influence on Japanese management methods (Ansho, 2024; Suárez-Barraza et al, 2025). The interviews and research studies show that Kaizen is a system that goes beyond business practice and has deeper roots in Japanese history and culture.

However, the Kaizen system is not without issues. The Japanese economy has been far from perfect in the recent decades and companies have been criticised for overworking and underpaying workers in many sectors (Kobayashi, 2024). Bazak (2023) notes that Kaizen is far from perfect since company internal issues such as funding, slow decision-making, lack of self-confidence and cultural barriers can be a hindrance to the

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implementation of Kaizen in an organisation. On the other hand, a lengthy article by Fujifilm (2023) sees a solution to these issues by recommending to adapt Kaizen to the specific environment of a company. Even if it might not seem suitable for the modern times anymore, in the manufacturing industry Kaizen is still relevant because these basic notions like improving step-by-step are still important. Even with drastic technological and societal changes, following the good points of Kaizen according to the organisation's environment can lead to an improved working culture and long-term success.

An entire book about the relevance of Kaizen in the 21st century also argues that defining Kaizen in modern times remains a complicated and complex topic and current challenges in a competitive business world could make it hard to implement (Suárez-Barraza, 2023). However, a key topic across the academic articles seems to be that adaptability must play a key role. Kaizen is a fluid concept which focuses on small steps rather than drastic changes which often lead to more instability, especially in times of instability. Furthermore, a people-focused approach in which individuals have the possibility to contribute to the long-term success of a company.

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### 3. Conclusion

So far, I have had unforgettable experiences during my time in Japan and highly recommend to everyone to go for it and apply to this scholarship. It really gives you a financial headstart for your life in Japan and the connections that come with this experience have been very helpful to build a network. It is also a great conversation starter if someone asks what you are doing in Japan. However, I would recommend planning and researching well ahead and having JLPT N3 level already to understand everyone better and not struggle with the N2 exam. I would recommend learning at least 300 Kanji and doing a lot of listening practice before moving here. I would also make sure to have enough savings because even though the Yen is weak, the salary is low and the cost of groceries is quite high in 2025.

By researching the topic of Kaizen for this report, I learned a lot about my own work process and how Japanese people think about constantly improving their work. I was surprised by how much focus on adaptability and individuality there was when reading about Kaizen. These features are usually not connected with Japanese work culture, but maybe this oxymoron makes it work and leads to the long-term success of Japanese companies. It was very motivational and funny at times to interview people about Kaizen and to make them think about Kaizen. Many took this task very seriously and I am as always impressed by the thoughtfulness and kindness Japanese people put into their answers. I want to also implement some of Kaizen's main principles into my own work and personal life to consistently achieve my goals. One of these goals is passing the JLPT N2 exam and by steadily studying kanji daily instead of cramming last-minute, I hope to achieve a good score in December.

In conclusion, this half a year of living in Japan has been very transformative, educational and exciting in many ways. I learned not only the language better, adapted to a completely different working culture and learned about a new deep-rooted concept, but also made connections I will treasure for the rest of my life.

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