Social Life One: Cell Phones – 社会生活 1: 携帯

Possession of a cell phone is vital for a vibrant social life in Japan. They are the most important means of communication in Japan, and almost all Japanese college students (and most Japanese in general) have one. For today’s Japanese young people, landline telephones and email addresses (excluding email addresses tied to a person’s cell phone) tend to be far more unreliable as means of contact and communication. Purchasing a cell phone plan for use in Japan is highly recommended for anybody staying there for an extended period of time.

For the most part, non-Japanese cell phones do not work in Japan. This is due to the different technology standards promoted in different regions of the world. Phones with GSM (Global Standard for Mobile communications) also do not work, because Japan lacks GSM infrastructure. The only international phones that do work are some 3G (Third Generation) models.

Students can contact their own service provider about getting a 3G phone compatible with the Japanese network. With this kind of phone, two options are available. The first is purchasing a plan with international roaming. This method tends to be very expensive. The second is to rent a Japanese SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) card, which provides the user with a Japanese phone number and domestic rates. Conversely, except for some phones compatible with 3G and GSM, Japanese phones do not work outside Japan.
Most often, students choose from one of three domestic mobile plans: rental 貸し携帯, prepaid プリペイド携帯, and normal subscription (普通の)携帯. Rental plans are for short-term use and require a credit card and any photo ID. They are available at all airports and through the mail. Some companies offer discounts if paying in advance through the internet. Fees range from 250 to 1000 yen per day plus utilization fees of between 70-200 yen per minute for outgoing domestic calls. Incoming calls are free.

Prepaid phones and subscription phones both require a Japanese photo ID such as a driver’s license or an alien registration card. Prepaid phones can be purchased at cell phone stores and convenience stores コンビニ. Subscribers to subscription phones need a bank account (one is provided to each student studying abroad at Kansai Gaidai) and pay a bill at the end of every month. Subscription plans offer the widest selection of handsets and features, such as television, music, games, electronic payment, and GPS navigation. Because prepaid and subscription cell phone plans both require an alien registration card, they essentially require a student to wait three weeks before becoming socially capable. Therefore, rental cell phone plans are the most cost-effective and socially beneficial means of communication for exchange students who stay only one semester in Japan. However, the subscription method is significantly more cost-effective for exchange students staying over two semesters. For them, the three-week wait is probably worth it.