

The Experience of a Foreign Student at the University of Tsukuba

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Introduction

I am a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian (3世) who came to Japan for the first time in October 2000 and arrived at the University of Tsukuba as a *Mombukagakusho*¹ scholarship student. At that time the university was celebrating the announcement of Professor (Emeritus) Hideki Shirakawa as the Nobel Prize winner in chemistry.

I am currently a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore. I just started this appointment in early August 2006, after I received my Ph.D. degree at the University of Tsukuba in July 2006 in the Doctoral Program of Quantitative Finance and Management, Graduate School of Systems and Information Engineering². In March 2003, I also received an MBA at the same university in the Master's Program in Management Science and Public Policy

Studies³.

In this article I would like to describe some facts and experiences, and give suggestions, as a former foreign student at this university.

Japanese Language Course

When a foreign student comes to Japan, one of the most difficult problems that he or she faces is the ability to speak and understand the Japanese language. Chinese students, although they cannot speak and read correctly, they can understand the *kanji* meaning. For students from other countries, however, particularly those from nations that only use the Roman alphabet, the Japanese language is very difficult, because it is totally different from English or their other native languages.

The University of Tsukuba provides a good course of Japanese language for foreign

students at the International Student Center⁴. Students with an advanced knowledge of Japanese do not need to take the Japanese classes, but students who are beginners or at an intermediate level in Japanese are required to attend an intensive Japanese language course every day for six months. The students use a textbook published by the university called *SFJ*⁵, which is considered one of the best materials for foreigners to learn Japanese. It includes grammar, basic conversation, writing, reading and listening. Another textbook, called *Basic Kanji Book* is used to study *kanji*. In addition, there are activities related to the Japanese culture and a presentation of each student's country, which is a good opportunity for interactions with people from different cultures and nations.

Although this program offers a good notion of the Japanese language, sometimes my classmates complained that the teachers treated students like children, particularly regarding class attendance. If a student missed one class, he or she had to report to the teacher the exact reason for not attending it. Most of the foreign students were taking the entrance examination for a graduate school, so they were adults and already knew their responsibilities. Thus, they considered that this type of control was affecting their private

lives. It has to be noted that this kind of problem is related to the culture differences between foreigners and Japanese. On one hand, the foreign student has to be conscious that he or she needs to respect and understand the Japanese culture; on the other hand, the Japanese also need to recognize that some changes must be implemented in order to become a more multicultural society.

Environment for foreign students

Before coming to Tsukuba, I thought that the university campus would be very small and narrow and would have only buildings. When I arrived here, I was very surprised to see a large university campus and a nice atmosphere with a rich collection of plants, trees, and lakes. I was also impressed by the great number of foreign students who represent 7.5% of the 15,598 total students enrolled in the university. More specifically, there are 1,163 international students from 85 different countries⁶.

This international environment encourages a good relationship with people from different cultures and nations, and at the same time it also makes it possible for foreign students to interact only within their foreign community. In this sense some of the foreign students do not have a significant

contact with Japanese society. There are some reasons for this. First, there is the language barrier. Foreign students are not able to communicate in Japanese with Japanese students, and, conversely, the Japanese do not feel comfortable speaking English. Second, foreign students feel better and more relaxed expressing themselves before other foreigners than before Japanese people. Third, it seems that some of the Japanese are still ashamed of, or averse to, foreigners. I remember a case of a friend of mine (non-Asian), who told me that he became angry every time he asked something in Japanese to a townsman, particularly when he had a company with an Asian appearance. In one instance the townsman did not look at him, but replied in Japanese to his company. It does not mean that the man was ignoring him. He simply did not feel comfortable speaking in Japanese to a foreigner who had a non-Asian appearance. I am not saying that this situation will always happen, but the foreigner has to be prepared for this kind of behavior.

In order to have a good interaction between foreign students and the Japanese culture, many clubs (*kurabu*), social activities, and home-stays (mostly outside Tsukuba) are available in the university, but they are mostly focused on unmarried people. For those who

are married, I think that the university or local population could bring some improvement by providing activities and assistance to help them interact with the Japanese society, particularly for spouses and children of the foreign students who come to Japan. It would be interesting to offer classes of Japanese language, basic information for living in Japan (hospital, dentist, kindergarten, and school), Japanese culture (*ikebana*, *shodo*, *bonsai*, etc.), Japanese cooking, and so on.

The Graduate School

Almost all the entrance examinations for master's and doctoral programs are prepared not only in Japanese but also in English, which allows the foreign students to answer the questions proposed in the examination and interview. In terms of lectures, even though most of the Japanese professors give their classes in Japanese (there are also lectures in English), a considerable number of faculty members have received their Ph.D. degrees outside Japan, such as in the U.S. and U.K. Thus, they are willing to help the foreign students anytime by speaking in English. In addition, particularly in my field of study (business and management), most of the textbooks, research papers, and references are published in English, and most of the

presentations, final examinations, and reports can be done in English. On one hand, this helps the foreign student to better understand the content of lectures, theories, and so on. On the other hand however, the foreign student does not improve his or her mastery of the Japanese language. It has to be noted that this also depends on the student's level of interest in learning Japanese. In practical terms, when a thesis or paper is written in English, the foreign student can easily submit it not only to international conferences and academic journals but also to domestic ones. This means that you can submit and present your research paper anywhere in the world, providing global exposure, but when the thesis or paper is written in Japanese, it is restricted to Japan.

In terms of the MBA course, the lectures were relatively interesting, but students were required to take a great number of classes (a total of 48 credits) most of which had a strong focus on mathematics or statistics. I am not saying that this is a bad point because for research papers you need to empirically prove your hypotheses; but because the course is called MBA, I expected more case studies rather than those lecture styles. I think that it was more an academic MBA rather than one for people with executive and entrepreneur profiles.

In the doctoral program, only a few students attended the lectures, but the level of the courses was considerably higher than in the master's program. I was very surprised that even in a classroom with a few students, some of them slept in front of the professor during the lecture. The amazing part is that the professor did not say anything to the students. This is the Japanese style.

I think that the doctoral program should offer the opportunity for Ph.D. students to conduct some lectures or seminars just to get some teaching experience in order to improve their own CVs. I had some colleagues in the Ph.D. program that did not have any professional experience. Thus, it becomes very difficult to get a job, particularly for university positions such as lecturer or a assistant professor. I already had two-year experience as an assistant professor, worked in a bank, and managed a fast food restaurant in Brazil, but those professional experiences were done before coming to Japan. After that I only focused on my research by completing the MBA and the Ph.D. That is not bad, but I think that some recent experiences are needed to get a good job. I know that it is not so easy to implement changes like that in the Japanese educational system, but it has to be considered as a suggestion.

Conclusion

The six years that I spent at the University of Tsukuba gave me a great experience, not only professionally but also for my personal life. I met so many people from different countries and they drastically opened my mind. Further, I had the opportunity to meet Japanese and foreign professors who provided me with knowledge, assistance, and support whenever necessary.

I believe that, in general terms, the University of Tsukuba offers a nice environment and a good infrastructure for foreign students who intend to study in Japan. The rest depends on the student's own work.

〔注〕

- 1) Japanese Government Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
- 2) 筑波大学大学院博士課程システム情報工学研究科・計量ファイナンス・マネジメント専攻
- 3) 筑波大学大学院独立修士課程経営・政策科学研究科・MBAコース
- 4) 筑波大学留学生センター
- 5) Situational Functional Japanese
- 6) As of May 1, 2005, Outline of the University of Tsukuba, p.16 and p.19.

(マリオ エンリケ オガサワラ／経営学)