

## Racheal Andrew (Undergraduate)

### IN THE BEGINNING

I will probably be asked the same question forever. 'Why didn't you study at the ANU?' True, I had a world-class university right on my doorstep and sufficient grades to pursue a double degree in Asian Studies and International Relations. Who in their right mind would abandon their hometown and support network to study at a lesser-known university in a foreign country? And why should you?

To answer that question, I will take you back to a small high school classroom where I fell in love with the simple, structured phonetics, the richness of the phrases so unlike the ones found in my own language, and the ideographic writing system that every Japanese language student comes to curse. My obsession became so bad that I began reading dictionaries for leisure, and I knew that the only way to truly master my passion was to live in the country where it was born. Miraculously my stars aligned, and no sooner had I graduated from college, I was on a JAL flight bound for Tokyo.

### THE FIRST YEAR

The first year of your life as an undergraduate student is spent attending an intensive language course at the Japanese Language Centre on campus. Every day for a year, you attend classes on grammar, listening, and – god forbid – kanji. While the language classes were challenging, it was the Japanese history, economic and politics lessons that proved to be the biggest headache, though in retrospect, my current position makes me glad I paid attention. Fortunately, the JLC provides an excellent support system and bends over backwards to ensure the physical and mental health of its students, including mentoring and overnight trips to various areas of Japan.

For the only time during your journey, you will be surrounded by other so-called 'government scholars' who are going through the exact same process of trying to get their grip on a difficult foreign language, making friends and acclimatising to a new culture. They will become your life-long friends, but also your rivals, as everyone will be vying for the top spot at the prestigious Tokyo University. Exercise caution. While Tokyo University may be the highest-ranked university within Japan and a free pass to employment at many Japanese companies, it is essential to research which university may best be suited to your needs and interests before you jump on the Todai bandwagon. For a self-proclaimed language nerd such as myself, there was no better option than Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, the only university in Japan to offer degrees in 27 different languages.

This may also be your first opportunity to live in a city as vibrant and rich in culture as Tokyo or Osaka. The noise and bustle of Tokyo was initially a shock for a teenager born and bred in Canberra, but the city quickly grew on me once I began to explore the narrow backstreets, frequent the tiny izakaya, and take notice of both the abundant history and greenery dotted about the towering cityscape.



*Studied at Tokyo  
University of  
Foreign Studies  
from 2008 to  
2015*

*Currently  
Assistant to  
Political/General  
Affairs, Embassy  
of Japan in  
Australia*



## THE MIDDLE YEARS

After graduating from your intensive course, you must step out of the warm, snuggly safety blanket of the JLC and dive-bomb into the ice bath that is university. All classes and assessment are still conducted in Japanese but now all your classmates are much more fluent than yourself and few are unable to sympathise with the experience of living and studying in a foreign country. Having said that, campus life had its highlights which include but are not limited to the enduring friendships, the interesting selection of classes and very economical canteen lunches.

University gave me experiences I never would have dreamed of having had I pursued my studies in Canberra. They include, but are not limited to:

1. Playing the bully in a theatrical performance of Higuchi Ichiyo's Takekurabe at our annual school festival
2. Sitting in the front row when Bakumon Gakumon, a famous Japanese TV program, came to shoot a special about communication at our university
3. Taking a delegation of Yolngu people (Indigenous Australians based in Arnhem Land) shoe shopping after they arrived in Tokyo for a symposium in the middle of winter wearing thongs

I could not talk about my university days without mentioning an activity that took up a good portion of my time. No, it is neither karaoke nor nomihodai. I believe one of the best opportunities for overseas students to immerse themselves in Japanese culture is by joining a university club, and that is precisely what I did. Be sure that you fully comprehend the difference between a bukatsu and a circle before joining. The former involves attending practice four or more times a week, risking hospitalisation from heatstroke, and learning that tardiness is a punishable offence. I am still not sure what the latter involves. However, joining a bukatsu was the perfect way to deepen my understanding of the strict hierarchy that forms the backbone of Japanese culture, particularly corporate culture. I would like to believe it taught me how to respect my seniors and buckle down, two qualities that would prove to be important when I started working at a Japanese firm several years later.

## STEPPING OUT INTO SOCIETY

At the end of your five years, you may decide that you have not yet had your fill and extend your stay. Many of my friends went on to pursue post-graduate studies, but I decided it was time to contribute back to the country that had supported me for so long. However, after acquiring sufficient speaking skills to hold a conversation, determining the difference between wa and ga, and learning to read all 2,000 of those nasty joyo kanji, I had achieved my life goal of 'mastering' Japanese somewhat prematurely and found myself at a loss as to my next step. Without thinking, I started working for a Japanese IT firm, but three years convinced me that IT was not my passion and I moved back to Australia. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to stumble in to a position at the Embassy of Japan. Working in the Political Section has opened my eyes to a career in diplomacy and foreign affairs so that one day I can help strengthen the bridges that made my life possible.

The MEXT scholarship helped me to achieve my goals and gave my life a direction, but it also did so much more. It lifted me out of my comfort zone, helped me look at the world from a different perspective and forged a place for Japan as a part of my identity so much that still now I bow on the phone, take my shoes off inside and genuinely enjoy eating fermented beans for breakfast. If that is not reason enough to convince you to do an undergraduate degree in Japan, I am lost for ideas.

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