

## Emily Wakeling (Research)

Receiving the Monbukagakusho Graduate Research Scholarship in 2010 allowed me to pursue what I love, and find new professional strengths and interests along the way. My advice for people who wish to expand their knowledge of Japan by following new professional and academic pathways is definitely to apply for MEXT. Reflecting on the experience, there are several pieces of advice I can give at steps along the way.



Photo by Geoff Bargewell

## WORK ON THAT APPLICATION

The application process requires multiple steps, plus an attractive research proposal. I was lucky one of my Japanese studies lecturers told me about MEXT during the last year of my Masters degree. There was a lot of information required. I remember there were extensive medical questions and tests, plus a mandatory English language exam—even for monolingual Australians. I was able to approach Japanese professors in my field using some of my Tokyo contacts to find and nominate a research supervisor with matching research areas. My art history thesis was a study of contemporary Japanese art, so my scholarship proposal was a plan to continue in this field—specifically, to research and deliver an exhibition of contemporary Japanese self-portraiture.

## SAY GOODBYE

I remember a long waiting period before the scholarship and visa were confirmed. Not knowing for sure what was happening in the next few months was very difficult, but not as hard as eventually packing up and saying goodbye. I had to quit my job, move out of my house and, hardest of all, I had to leave behind family and friends. In these moments it was necessary to have faith in the opportunities the scholarship would potentially hold, and the benefits it would have for my employment and life opportunities when I returned home. I'm glad I tied up all my loose ends because the two-year scholarship ultimately became six years living in Tokyo, and even longer before I returned to Australia.

## BE UNCOMFORTABLE

Once there, my advice is to be prepared to be uncomfortable. I came to Japan with a little language preparation, numerous experiences visiting Japan as a tourist, and my previous academic Japanese cultural studies; despite this, the first three months were still a shock to the system. Often it felt like being a high-school student all over again. In addition to the traditional classroom style of Japanese language training, it felt like I was back at a stage in my life where I couldn't do everyday things easily by myself, like read food labels or walk around my neighbourhood. I also made silly mistakes with my Japanese, like explaining my headache as “atama ga warui” instead of “atama ga itai.” These instances are of course embarrassing at the time but also a necessary step in the learning process.

*Studied at Tokyo  
University of Foreign  
Studies and Sophia  
University from 2010  
to 2012*

*Currently Assistant  
Curator, Asian and  
Pacific Art, Queensland  
Art Gallery | Gallery of  
Modern Art*



## SUPPORT YOUR PEERS

Naturally, I missed my community of friends and family. Due to the language and cultural barriers, it was a challenge (at first) to find connections with local people. For this reason, being surrounded by intelligent and accomplished fellow scholarship recipients in the Japanese language school was an important support network in those first months in Tokyo. It was best to do things together with my peers so that we could help each other with new challenges. I don't know what I would have done without support from my peers when I had to open a Japan Post bank account, which is a requirement in your first week in order to start receiving the MEXT scholarship payments.

## CONNECT

The early connections I made with my peers were not only necessary for survival: one unexpected but fortuitous outcome was that some of those friendships became important academic and professional connections. What's more, I would not have ended up as an art history lecturer without recommendations from senior teachers who were introduced to me through mutual connections. Again and again, I found that Tokyo wasn't as big as I thought it was as I made more connections within the local art scene. My hometown, Brisbane, is only a tiny fraction of the size of Tokyo, but I found that the art scene's gatekeepers—people like artists, collectors, and arts workers—were just as tight and personable as they were in Australia.



## SAY YES

As my network grew, I was fortunate enough to be offered more and more teaching and writing opportunities. My teaching career began as a part-time job (again, the job was made possible through my networks) to supplement my income while studying. From there, I gained the skills and experience to take on university lecturing work in my research specialty, visual arts. I didn't expect to become an educator, but it's now a big part of my professional goals in and outside art museums. As for my art writing, it started with small opportunities for exposure but then became chances to write as a regional expert of contemporary Japanese art for respected international publications. I was also the editor of a local bilingual art and design website. I found that the more I said yes, the better the opportunities became. All of this lead to the education and museum work I became involved in when I later moved to London and now recently back in Australia.

The most valuable part of my MEXT experience was the chance to learn about Japan from the inside. It has immeasurably impacted the way I think, write and research about the country and its people. I hope my work will provide important information about the real Japan, beyond cute mascots, and give voice to a diverse range of art practices and artists. To all prospective MEXT scholars: nothing beats living there, first-hand, finding the features you feel passionate about, and making the most of the opportunities that are offered to you.

Emily Wakeling

