

Katie Skillington (Research)

WHY DID I CHOOSE JAPAN?

In 2014, my husband and I started devising our plan to one-day live overseas – we were young, about to be married, and wanted to further our careers and experiences in a different culture. As architects and designers, Japan was a really appealing option. We had previously travelled to Japan twice as tourists, and our love for the culture, landscape, food and cities grew with each visit. At that time, I had no significant research experience in an academic environment, yet I held an aspiration to complete post-graduate study in my area of interest: sustainability for architecture, planning and design. It was at this point that I found the MEXT: Global 30 programs in English and the Graduate Program in Sustainability Science – Global Leadership Initiative at the University of Tokyo. The course was flexible in what research could be undertaken, whilst providing the breadth of knowledge required to understand sustainability at a conceptual level. The University of Tokyo has a good global reputation for research, so I knew the degree would be internationally recognised post-completion. Considering all of this, I applied, was offered, and accepted my MEXT scholarship via University Recommendation to study a Master of Sustainability Science at the University of Tokyo, starting in October 2015.



THE BEST EXPERIENCES IN JAPAN

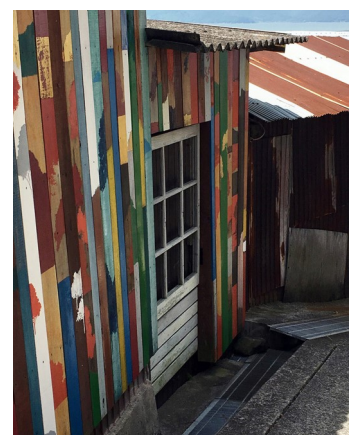
Exploring Tokyo and its lesser known areas was the highlight of this experience. Despite growing up in regional NSW, I've always felt drawn to the verticality and intensity of higher density cities, and Tokyo is an excellent example of the kind of city I love. As I lived only 30mins by train to Akihabara, a huge diversity of experiences and events were in easy reach. I'd often just leave home – armed with an IC card, cash, and my camera – with no itinerary other than a destination to walk around and explore. Tokyo is an amazing city to experience by foot, with some beautiful buildings, gardens, temples, shrines, great food, more excellent food, people, and did I mention the amazing food?! Getting out there and experiencing as much as my wallet and timetable could permit was the highlight of my time in Japan.

*Studied at The
University of Tokyo
from 2015 to 2017*

*Currently PhD
Student at the
University of
Melbourne*

HOW HAS THE EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN SHAPED ME AND CHANGED MY LIFE

Personally, I found that this experience brought me to a place where I began to earnestly appreciate and understand the significant challenges our global society faces. My program had a small cohort of international and Japanese students all passionate about how sustainability influences their nation's future. My program was vastly international, and many students researched problems that their country was experiencing in disciplines other than my own. After sharing two years with my peers in my program at the University of Tokyo, I feel far more globally aware and empathetic to the plight of so many people around the world. Academically, this experience gave me confidence in my research ability. During my studies I received several awards from my program and my faculty for academic excellence, which reassured me that I was a good candidate for a PhD program at my alma-mater, the University of Melbourne.



IF I DIDN'T RECEIVE THE SCHOLARSHIP...

Honestly, there was no Plan B. If I hadn't received the MEXT scholarship, I would not have been able to move to Japan and do my course. Without a MEXT scholarship, moving to Japan for study was not financially viable for me. Also, I was in my late 20s when I applied, so I was getting close to the age eligibility ceiling. As such, the most likely path for me if I hadn't received the scholarship was staying in the workforce and studying locally part time.

ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE MEXT SCHOLARS

Firstly, make a plan. The MEXT scholarship, course or training that you will be doing in Japan is just one step. The students with the better outcomes have a plan beyond their initial MEXT scholarship. Secondly, if Japanese language isn't a requirement for your course or training, still try to immerse yourself in language learning at every moment, including opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings. Japanese language wasn't a requirement for my program but learning the language in all its facets helped me in my everyday life and travelling around Japan. I am very far from fluent but having some language ability encouraged me to broadly travel throughout Japan. Thirdly, as a MEXT scholar you should try to 'give back' to Japanese society while residing there. It may be through volunteering, cultural exchanges or just getting to know your neighbours! Whatever avenue is right for you, don't forget that it is the Japanese government and the Japanese people are who are supporting you in your studies and life in Japan.



A FINAL REFLECTION

When I was offered the MEXT scholarship, there was period when I doubted whether or not I should accept. During this time, an important person in my life posed this question: "If you go to Japan, do you think there will be a moment in 10 years' time when you reflect on the decision and think it was a bad move?" Although I was aware that there would be ups and downs – and there were – I couldn't envisage a time in the future when I would label the whole experience as a 'bad move'. Today – with the help of some luck, a great partner and hard work – I can now emphatically say that it was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

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