

Leigh Soding (Young Leader's Program, Government Course)

BEFORE GOING TO JAPAN

I was not contemplating undertaking any postgraduate study when I first became aware in the Australian Treasury of the Young Leaders' Program (YLP) offered by MEXT at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. However, YLP was too good an opportunity to not apply for, given I had a longstanding interest in Japan. I studied Japanese language at high school and then a few courses at university, while studying economic and politics at Murdoch University, Western Australia. While I had the opportunity to participate in a 3 week homestay exchange in Kobe during high school and a brief visit to Japan for work when I was on secondment to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I had always wanted to experience Japan that much more.

I was also attracted to the unique nature of the program – being able to study overseas with other young public officials from other countries – offering knowledge and experiences that I would not receive from studying a Masters of Public Policy in Australia. It was fair to say that immediately prior to moving to Japan to commence the scholarship, I was equal parts anxious and excited. Anxious how much my Japanese language proficiency had declined and whether I would improve my fluency over the course of the year. But excited for one whole year away from my day-to-day work to participate in a unique opportunity of studying with people from around the world in a country that I was eager to learn more about and see first-hand.



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BEST EXPERIENCES IN JAPAN

It is hard to point to the single best experience from my time at GRIPS. There were so many memorable ones! It was meeting, studying and becoming friends with fellow public officials from countries across Central and Southeast Asia, and Africa, which means I have that many more reasons to visit these countries and hopefully encourage them to visit Australia. It was learning from many eminent and influential Japanese professors and hearing from the key Japanese ministries on the public policy priorities and challenges Japan faces. Or perhaps thanks to the monthly sake parties at GRIPS, being able to try sake from probably every sake-making prefecture in Japan!

It was being able to see the length and breadth of Japan, from Hokkaido to Kagoshima, while visiting places that tourists cannot easily access such as nuclear power plants, or steel works where Australian iron ore ends up being turned into Japanese cars, or world heritage listed sites such as Shirakawa-gō, or the hustle and bustle yet many distinct neighbourhoods of Tokyo, or the many small villages and rural life of Japan. It was climbing Mt Fuji to see the sunrise, in Gujo-ken making plastic food replicas by hand, and being interviewed by the Chunichi Shimbun while learning how to dance so we could participate in the traditional Gujo-odori festival. Or given my love of baseball, it was the opportunity to see almost 20 Japanese pro-baseball games across the country soaking up the uniquely fanatical atmosphere that Japanese baseball games have.

A LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCE

But above all personally the best experience from my time in Japan, which indeed shaped and changed my life, was meeting my wife there. She was also a postgraduate student, studying at Meiji University, and as I prepared the speech for my wedding in November 2017, I often thought that if it wasn't for going to Japan to study, I would have never met the person who has changed my life. While the scholarship provided me with fond and lifelong memories of Japan, I have now made a lifelong commitment to Japan, its culture, people and language with my marriage. Indeed the year in Japan has encouraged me to try and spend some of my working life in Japan.



WHY YOU SHOULD CONSIDER STUDING IN JAPAN

I cannot speak highly enough of the wonderful experiences, friendships and opportunities that my MEXT scholarship provided. Since returning from Japan, I have been fortunate to work on issues relating to Japan, where I am able to draw on the knowledge and experience gained from my time at GRIPS. While YLP was unique in that we were taught in English and my fellow students were also from overseas, it didn't stop us feeling immersed in the various aspects of Japan that we studied. This was because our professors, lecturers and administrative support staff at GRIPS went out of their way to ensure we felt welcomed in Japan, saw as much as we could (or at least visited their hometown and prefecture).

I hope those that consider applying for a MEXT scholarship are as fortunate as I was to enjoy a wide range of experiences and many friendships built from studying and living in Japan.

Leigh Soding

*A life changing
experience
awaits you in
Japan!*

