

## Studying in Pandemic Era Japan

Tomas Dexters, 09/02/2023

As a first-year doctorate student at The University of Tokyo funded through the MEXT program, I was asked about my experiences so far by the Japanese embassy in Belgium. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, studying at Japanese universities through exchange programs has been impossible for many and difficult for others for years. Are these problems a thing of the past and is studying Japan back to normal? As with so many things the answer is a resounding “it depends”, so I would like to offer my experiences and perspective.

After I obtained my master’s degree in Law from Kyushu University in 2019, my plan was to continue my studies in Japan. Unfortunate timing and the pandemic meant that I was not able to continue my studies until 2021 after obtaining the MEXT scholarship. In July of that year, I was also notified that entry into Japan was possible, and I ended up being able to get my visa and was on a plane headed to Japan at the end of November. It turned out I was lucky, since infections steadily increased during November and December and border restrictions were soon restored. Having to be quarantined in a big hotel complex and relying on a small convenience store for food for two weeks after arriving was tough, but I had managed to make it into the country.



Dormitory room, source: The University of Tokyo, Housing Office

Once I got settled into my student dormitory, the biggest examples of the previously mentioned “it depends” would come up. Despite making it into Japan, the country itself was still very much in a state of lockdown. This was my third time as an exchange student in Japan, so arriving at my dormitory and being told the commons were inaccessible was a bit of a bitter pill. These include shared amenities such as vacuum cleaners and clothing irons, which meant I had to purchase these myself. There were also no formal events for socializing, which was understandable but unfortunate. The dorm I was assigned to was mainly one for short term stays and research students, so situations could have easily been different in other locations. Classes as well were still held online, so in a certain sense the core of

my experience as a research student was still the same, but with a more Japanese background. Classmates that were staying in a different dormitory had very different experiences, however. Theirs was a unit-based system, with several rooms having shared kitchen and other utilities. This made it far easier to socialize and make friends, compared to mine where the only chance of meeting people was having overlapping timings for doing laundry and cooking food.

That said, the situation has since then changed, and the prospects currently are that Japan will reclassify Covid-19 to a “common infectious disease” in May 2023. Having started my doctorate in October 2022, things have already changed compared to my year as a research student. Classes have mostly been offline, though mask wearing is still commonplace. Since I’ve always been rather slow at remembering people’s faces, masks certainly didn’t help matters. This would depend quite a bit on the teachers’ preferences ultimately, with some preferring to stay safe and still hold online classes to this day.

Life in Tokyo itself as an exchange student is at times easier and more difficult. While tourists are gradually becoming a more common sight, it’s still a great time for going around Japan and not have



Yokohama's Chinatown around 8 pm on a weekday

immense crowds at some the more popular destinations. On the other hand, the lack of tourists has certainly impacted many businesses, forcing them to close their doors. When going somewhere in the weekends, it’s almost second nature to check interesting places on Google Maps to see if they are still in business. Similarly, many restaurants still close early in the evenings. Living in a quiet neighbourhood in Tokyo, I’ve had the issue of having my favourite places nearby being closed because I didn’t realize it was already 8pm.

As for my experience as a doctorate student in Japan, I’ve found that various means to enrich and enhance your studies still exist. In many ways though, there’s more of a need to seize the opportunities

yourself. Previously other schools would have study trips and cultural events for foreign students. These are no longer possible as they were with the pandemic, but at the same time there's nothing stopping you from gathering up some classmates and exploring Japan by yourselves. The first time I came to Japan as an exchange student, I took part in many activities that were on offer by my host university. These were fantastic for me to explore Japan and myself. Now that I know what I enjoy and what I don't, I find that there is more freedom to pursue my own interests. Academic conferences now are often done through Zoom, making it far easier to fit them into my schedule. Compared to my previous experiences in Japan, I find it far easier to plan and execute my work-life balance.

What is likely even more important now is the need to do your research before coming to Japan. How is dormitory life in the university you're aiming for and to what degree are activities impacted by the pandemic? What are you looking forward to doing and seeing in Japan and how will my choice in host university and living situation affect this? And on that final note of living situation and conditions in general, I also feel the need to discuss finances. With inflation across the entire globe affecting prices, I can assure you that having a MEXT scholarship is more than sufficient to cover a comfortable living situation for most. Those wanting to have their own apartment in central Tokyo will have to compromise perhaps, but that's probably a more extreme case. During my stay here, there have been several support schemes from the local and national government for financial support for students hit by the pandemic. My university also has various support initiatives in place, going from general consultations on everyday problems, support for administrative procedures to vaccination events.

To summarize, there is still much to be gained and enjoyed by studying in Japan. The pandemic's effects are still lingering and tangible in everyday life. Returning to Belgium for a few weeks last summer was a balancing act between trying to fit in and not feeling guilty over not wearing a facial mask. But the situation in Japan does not stand in the way of being able to enjoy a rich experience that opens new doors to the future.