

### **MEXT Scholarship Recipient Report – Charlotte Bekkers**

Hello! My name is Charlotte Bekkers. I graduated in 2021 from KU Leuven with a master's degree in language and area studies: Japanese studies. As a 2021 MEXT scholarship recipient, I was a postgraduate international research student at the Graduate Schools for Law and Politics at the University of Tokyo from October 2021 to March 2023.

My adventure as a research student in Japan had a bit of an unusual start. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the travel restrictions imposed by a lot of countries – including Japan – my departure was postponed for an indefinite period. This meant that for the two first months of my enrolment, I attended my courses at Tōdai remotely. I was lucky enough to receive permission to fly to Japan at the end of November 2021, right before the Omicron variant of the coronavirus put a halt to international travel again. After one nearly-empty plane ride – I believe there were only about five (!) passengers in total on my flight – and two weeks of quarantine in a hotel room during which I tried virtually all the food options that the hotel's *conbini* had to offer, my adventure in Tokyo finally began.

Amidst all the excitement I felt to finally be able to start this new chapter in my life – preparing and applying for the scholarship, taking care of the necessary administrative matters after the first round, and waiting for the final results had taken close to one and a half year – I had been blissfully unaware of the fact that moving abroad requires a lot of adaptation skills. I soon found out that moving abroad on your own to the other side of the world is not all plain sailing, even when you have studied Japanese for a few years. However, after that initial period of running back and forth for administrative and personal matters – think bank account, apartment hunting, health insurance, resident registration, mobile phone subscription etc. – during which I realized my Japanese language skills left much room for improvement, things started to fall in their place. Soon enough, I had memorized the most direct route to my university campus, knew where to buy the cheapest fresh vegetables in the neighborhood, and had developed the habit of stopping by at the local *wagashi-ya* on a Friday afternoon after classes. After asking for their advice one time about which confectionery to try out – deliberately making some small talk with locals was one of my 'strategies' to get out of my comfort zone and practice Japanese – the shop's kind owners seemingly started to recognize

me and freely offered me a freshly baked *dorayaki* whenever the opportunity arose, even though I only ever bought one piece of confectionery at a time.

Because as a research student you are not formally enrolled in a BA or MA program, you enjoy a great deal of freedom when it comes to organizing your time. However, I encourage everyone to be mindful of the fact that your time in Japan is, most likely, limited. For that reason, I strongly advise you to get the most out of your experience as a MEXT scholar by making fruitful use of everything your university has to offer. Sign up for the courses that interest you, use the libraries to read that monthly academic journal relevant to your area of expertise, attend conferences or presentations to stimulate your critical thinking, and dive into those university archives to get your hands on some primary sources. In my case, my faculty allows research students to audit courses on the condition that they get permission from the professor who teaches the class. During my time at Tōdai, I audited eight courses (six taught in Japanese, two in English) and participated in two Japanese-language classes, which came down to an average of four class periods per week each semester. While this may not seem like a lot – or so I thought in the beginning – the preparation needed to actively participate can easily add up to a couple of days' worth of work, especially when preparing for a *zemi* or seminar. Add in your personal research project and, as in my case, the preparation for the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), and before you know it that empty schedule is fully packed.

Doing these things may seem like a lot of work – and I'm not saying it isn't – but it will also increase your chances to quickly make some social connections. Having lived in Tokyo for one year and a half, of which most was spent during a (quasi) state of emergency or with considerable social restrictions, I cannot understate the importance of meaningful social connections when it comes to mental well-being. Quite contradictory to the imagination, life in a megacity such as Tokyo can quickly become rather lonely if you do not proactively 'get out there' and try to meet people. So in addition to the academic activities mentioned above, I would definitely recommend everyone to also seek out opportunities to develop a social life, be it by joining a club at university, going to events by an organization whose vision or engagement interests you, or simply by starting a conversation with a stranger in a coffee place or bar. Some of the people you will meet on these occasions will be

fleeting acquaintances, while other encounters may develop into lifelong friendships.

With this, I hope to have given you a bit of an idea about my experience as a MEXT scholar and maybe to have even sparked your interest in the program. The past one and a half years have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I cannot recommend the MEXT Scholarship Program highly enough. While I am indebted to many people who have supported me along the way, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor for his guidance and support, and of course to the Government of Japan for making this possible.