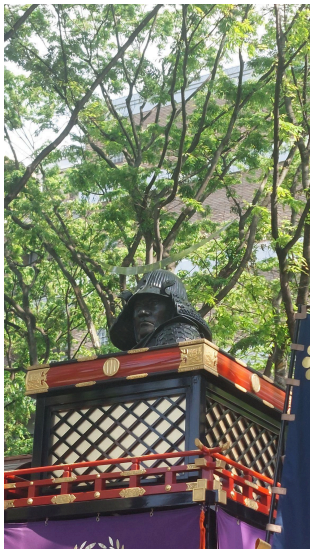
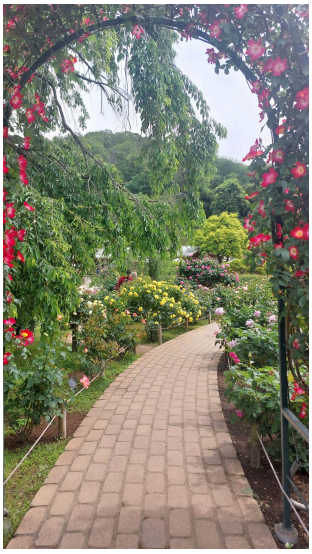
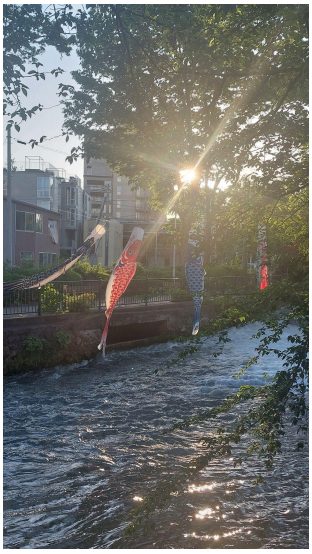
Korino Bursens. MEXT 2025 Ph.D. student at Tohoku University.
(October 2026 Report)


One year and a half into my MEXT-journey, I have learnt and seen more things than I can keep count of. Now, with some experience under my belt, I also have a clearer view on how things work at university and how to organise my research, which comes with its own regrets and 'if only I'd known!'-moments from time to time; therefore, I would like to dedicate this semester's report to three **Things I Wish I'd Known When I Started My Studies** as a MEXT student. Hopefully, reading about my experiences could give prospective MEXT candidates a little advantage!

Thing #1: attend seminars. Seminars make up the bulk of obligatory classes for master students at most Japanese universities, including mine. As a research student who was looking to start the Ph.D. program, none of these seminars have been obligatory for me, and as I was anxious to have as much time as I could to study for the entrance exam, I did only attend one during each semester last year. However, since starting the Ph.D. program this April, I've taken to attending as many as I can. I've noticed that attending these seminars, despite their content seeming highly specific at first glance, are just as, or even more valuable for getting up to speed with the current state of the field than reading a handbook. In the typical humanities seminar in Japan, a few books, selected by the lecturer, are read over the course of the semester; each class, a student presents a few chapters of the book that's been assigned that week, and the contents are discussed with the group. In my case, the books we read are often ethnographies, from the classics to lesser known

works, but it is during the discussions that a deeper understanding of these works and their place within the research field is forged. Not only do we analyse the content of the book itself, we also make links to our own research and to other established theories and examples; through this practice, seminars provide a clear view of the *status quaestionis* of your field through comparison and the unique insights of your professors and fellow students on a regular basis. This is why I feel like seminars make up such an important component of your integration into your lab: through them, you find out first hand what accents and emphases are placed by your particular professors and peers.

Thing #2: relax with your fellow students. When it comes to maintaining a social life while studying abroad in Japan, the first tip generally is to join a club or circle during your free time. I, too, was a member of a circle during my first year here, and the friendships and memories I have made during that time are some I wouldn't trade for the world. However, for most students, once they enter the regular program, especially a Ph.D., it becomes difficult to find enough time to allocate to such after-school activities. I quit my circle, as I simply became unable to give my all to it three times a week on top of studies and research; but this doesn't mean I quit having a social life! I find that my fellow graduate students at the lab are the people I end up spending the most time with now; we all know the grind, we work together in the lab, and after work, as well as during breaks, it is just nice to have a chat, share some drinks and unwind together. The lab also organises activities like *imonikai*, cherry blossom viewings, or low-stakes dinners in the common room after the weekly meeting of the graduate students, which I highly recommend you attend if your future lab also does these. When it comes to social activities, you might not always find the energy to go out and meet new people, but through forging a comfortable environment with your labmates, you can prevent yourself from getting too isolated during busy times, even if it's just through a few words or an understanding gaze!

Thing #3: go out into the field. This point will only be relevant to those of you who are thinking to pursue a more anthropological or otherwise fieldwork-adjacent direction with their research, but feel free to read on regardless of whether it might apply to you; you might still pick up something interesting from it. When it comes to fieldwork, I think it is best to start as early as possible. I have officially started mine this semester, the second semester of my first year in the regular Ph.D. program, so one and a half years into my studies, though I have done some more informal trips to my 'field' over the past months as well. The thing that stopped me from going earlier was the need to be absolutely prepared and have a strong plan for going out; however, as I've started adapting to this new method, I've come to realise that plans shape themselves and transform through experience, and that you can gather valuable data even if you're not quite sure what you'll do with it yet. Simply being out there, going to places, talking to people and hearing their thoughts can help you form a direction, a purpose to your research you couldn't have reached from up in the ivory tower, however scary it might be to step into the unknown. If you're already considering MEXT, then you are someone who has the necessary courage: if you manage to

gain the scholarship and start your studies, you'll surely be able to find said courage again and again. The most important thing to keep in mind when you want to progress your research, if you're prone to worrying like me, is this: do not overthink! Go first and analyse later.

Those are the three pieces of advice I would like to leave you with this time. My opinions on them might change as I continue on this journey, who knows; but that is the beauty of studying abroad. Being out here is not just learning and growing academically; it's also living life. Living is what changes you, inevitably. Embrace it!

Pic. 1: A *Date Masamune bust peeking on top of a float during the Sendai Aoba Matsuri*

Pic. 2: *Ashikaga Flower Park in bloom*

Pic. 3: *Koi streamers hanging over the Hirose river for Children's Day in Maebashi, Gunma*

Pic. 4: *Tentative beginnings of Autumn in Inokashira Park, Kichijōji*