

# From Scholarship to Sakura: A MEXT Scholar's Tale

*By: Sagnik Sengupta*

Ever since my teenage years in Kolkata, when I first discovered anime on my humble desktop, Japan has held a special place in my heart. This dream, once a distant star, became a reality in the summer of '22. I received an acceptance letter from Kyushu University, offering me the opportunity to pursue a Master's in Law. This was made possible by the Monbukagakusho scholarship, or MEXT, sponsored by the Japanese Government. My academic journey began in October of the same year and concluded in September of '23. The path to fulfilling this childhood aspiration of mine was arduous and lengthy, but as I pen this article from Tokyo – the pulsating heart of Japan – I can assert with conviction that every moment was worth it.



Japan, the land of the rising sun, transitioned from a dream to a tangible goal when I began studying the Japanese language as a foreign business language during my undergraduate studies. My Japanese language teacher introduced me to the MEXT scholarship, but I was initially discouraged upon learning that the successful candidates had predominantly been from science backgrounds, while I was studying law. Despite this, my interest in Japan as a career destination steadily grew throughout my time at university. The potential career opportunities offered by Japanese firms, contingent on my acceptance into one of Japan's prestigious "Imperial Universities", further motivated me. By my final year, I was actively pursuing the scholarship.

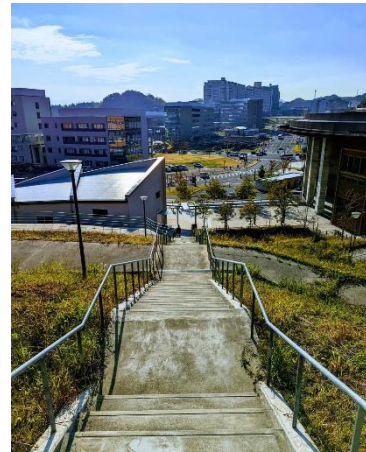
Did I consider Japan merely as one of many options for my overseas master's degree? Absolutely not. For me, it was Japan or nothing at all. As I navigated the final phase of my undergraduate studies, I poured every available moment into the MEXT scholarship application. I didn't even entertain the thought of exploring universities in other countries, let alone feel any inclination to do so. Fueled by a dream that took root in my childhood and nurtured through my language studies at university, Japan was more than a destination – it was a calling. I was so committed to this path that I was ready to reapply if my initial attempt didn't succeed.

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On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, I found myself landing in Fukuoka, the largest city on the island of Kyushu in southern Japan, home to Kyushu University. My flight was scheduled by the university about 10 days prior to the start of my program, which meant I arrived on campus before most of the other students. Having spent my life in the bustling metropolises of India, and moving from one to another for my undergraduate studies, the location of my new campus in Fukuoka took me by surprise. It was situated on the city's outskirts, a place we playfully referred to as “田舎” (pronounced: inaka), which translates to ‘countryside’. The landscape was a stark contrast to what I was accustomed to – vast expanses of rice fields stretched out to the horizon, punctuated only by a smattering of Japanese convenience stores, or “コンビニ” (pronounced: konbini), standing sentinel before them. The sight was both shocking and intriguing, marking the beginning of my new journey.



*Itoshima Peninsula (Home to Ito Campus)*



*Ito Campus  
(Kyushu University)*

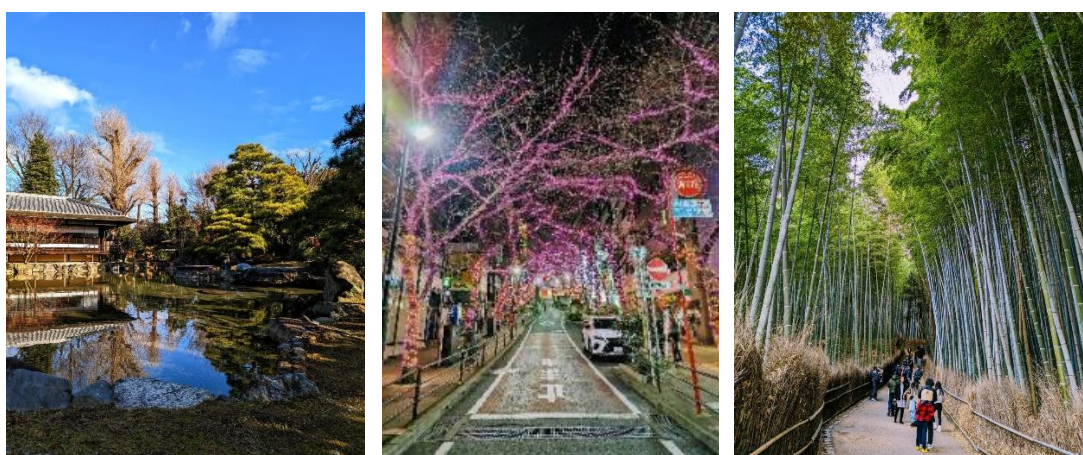
It didn't take long for me to understand why the campus was situated where it was – it's the largest in Japan! Within hours of settling into my dormitory, I encountered a small group of students from all six inhabited continents. Some of these individuals have become lifelong friends, a fact that brings me joy as I write this article. I had previously heard from my Indian friends who studied abroad about how they were integrated into existing Indian communities at their universities. However, my experience was markedly different, and honestly, it was something I had been looking forward to. I found myself in a community of international students, a melting pot of nationalities, or as I later realized, a community of 'English-speaking' students. English speakers are a rarity in Japan, particularly outside the city centers of major cities. In no time, I got to know

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students, researchers, and professors from numerous countries worldwide, many of whom I now consider friends.

Regardless of their academic discipline, every student's experience varies, particularly in relation to coursework and experiences with professors. Consequently, the forthcoming portion of my article is dedicated to the time I spent in Japan, a period that transcended my academic commitments and stress, a time that was enriched by the friendships I forged (with friends from multiple disciplines).

Japan, I assure you, caters to all tastes and interests. My experiences ranged from communal viewings of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in our dormitory, night after exhilarating night, to explorations of local bookstores brimming with manga. I discovered cafes so unique they seemed to exist only in whispers – one, I believe, was a beaver café. The natural beauty of Japan was a constant source of adventure. I hiked up mountains, swam at pristine beaches, and reveled in the city's vibrant nightlife. I engaged in spontaneous conversations with locals at “居酒屋” (pronounced: izakaya), my Japanese improving with each interaction. The cultural richness of Japan was another facet I explored. I visited numerous temples and shrines, embarked on trips to various cities, and savored the unique local cuisines each place had to offer. In those few months, it felt as though I had lived multiple lifetimes, such was the depth and diversity of my experiences.



*Shrines, Gardens, Christmas Lights, Bamboo Forests*

My journey as a student in Fukuoka was a whirlwind of experiences, culminating in the attainment of my master's degree and an additional graduate diploma that I elected to pursue. Although my academic chapter in Japan has concluded, my life here is just

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beginning, now independent of the university's guidance. Post-graduation, I relocated to Tokyo for work. As I pen this article, I find myself transitioning into the role of what the Japanese term as a “社会人” (pronounced: shakaijin), or a working adult.

If you have read this far, you might be pondering the necessity of mastering the Japanese language for the MEXT scholarship or for admission into a Japanese university. While the answer can vary significantly depending on the discipline and university, the short answer is no, at least for graduate programs. However, it's worth noting that having a grasp of Japanese, even at a basic conversational level, can dramatically alter your experience in Japan compared to not knowing the language at all.

For those of you who dream of studying and living in Japan, I encourage you to immerse yourself fully in not only the application process but also in understanding the rich Japanese culture, language, cities, lifestyle, legal system, cuisine, and all other aspects that I may have overlooked. If Japan is your chosen destination, you're likely already on this path, so keep up the good work! If you have any specific questions, feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn (preferred). I'm delighted to share that some students have already done so, and one of them has even secured a scholarship and is now preparing for their academic journey in Japan. Thank you for your time, and “頑張れ!”.

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