



Chapter 7

Reflection on Graduate Research Training at Japanese National Universities

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7.1 Introduction

So far, this volume has established the higher education and societal contexts between South Africa and Japan, outlined the collaboration potential between the countries and analysed a case study of partnership programmes between Japan and Zambia. The previous chapter offered a second case study of Japanese universities' involvement on the Africa continent, as an objective lesson to learn from, in exploring possibilities for South African – Japanese universities' partnerships. This chapter supplements Chapter 6 by offering the lived experience of a Malawian student in the collaboration case focused on in Chapter 6.

The number of international students in Japanese universities has been soaring since the mid-1980s, partly owing to the government policy aimed at increasing the number of international students in Japanese universities by 2000 (Murphy-Shigematsu 2002:19). Meanwhile, providing support for a quality learning environment is critical for Japanese universities that host international students. Yet, while Japanese universities have increased efforts to attract international students, “many of these universities are struggling to become more international and accommodate

foreign students” (Hennings & Tanabe 2018:1914). Understanding students’ experiences could provide insights into a university’s shortcomings, which can be scrutinised and resolved to attract and retain international students.

This chapter presents the author’s research training experience at a Japanese national university to determine its limitations. This contribution is especially significant in the context of transforming national universities into independent agencies that seek to improve the global competitiveness of higher education in Japan (Oba 2007).

This chapter is structured as follows: first, the literature on international students was reviewed, followed by the author’s biographical information. The literature review section, particularly the research on international students in Japan, provides a conceptual framework for discussing the author’s personal experiences. The specific aspects of the framework are: expectation and motivation to study in Japan, interdisciplinary research programme, student support services, cultural encounter, research training, supervision and supportive climate.

7.2 Research on International Students in Japan

In Japan, universities and junior colleges provide higher education. The mode of delivery includes traditional face-to-face classroom instruction, while other universities, such as the Open University of Japan, offer distance education that integrates information communication technologies. In terms of policy framework, the Japanese government plays a leading role in regulating higher education. The incorporation of national universities in 2004 is one of the contemporary policy reforms that the Ministry of Education has championed to enhance the competitiveness of higher education in Japan.

Alongside the corporatisation of national universities, efforts to attract international students have been motivated by declining numbers of domestic students (Hennings & Tanabe 2018). For example, Hennings and Tanabe (2018) cite the Japanese government’s plan, implemented in 2008, to

reach 300,000 international students by 2020. However, this was not the only rationale for recruiting international students. In addition to being a source of necessary foreign revenue, international students contribute to intercultural learning and increase understanding of diversity and global issues (NAFSA 2003, cited in Andrade 2006). In the context of Japan, this can be understood through international students' motivation to study there. The literature shows that some international students are attracted to studying in Japan because of their ability to study in English while living in Japan, the availability of financial assistance, the affordability of study programmes and their curiosity about Japanese culture.

The literature also provides insights into the challenges faced by international students at Japanese universities. They experience the following challenges: intercultural association with Japanese people, mental health issues, exaggerated cost of living and coping with academic demands, especially conducting research (Murphy-Shigematsu 2002:19). Using the example of Aoyama Gakuin University, Hiratsuka (2019) demonstrates how the Japanese language serves as one of the major organisational barriers for international students while accessing university services and resources. According to Hiratsuka (2019:965), some Japanese universities have developed "English-taught degree programs to attract more international students, [but] university services often do not provide information in English". Through this case study, Hiratsuka highlights the need for the internationalisation of university resources to facilitate an accessible, uniform and supportive academic milieu at Japanese universities.

Notably, international student adjustment issues have global implications for intercultural education. Hence, the researchers work extensively to reveal the factors that influence international students' adjustment. One study found that "scholarship recipients were better adjusted than those relying on private sources for funding" (Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama & Fujihara 1994:55). Yeh and Mayuko (2003:143) noted that factors such as friendships with residents, gender, country of origin and year in school also affect adjustment.

However, friendships and teamwork with domestic peers are problematic because the latter is not always responsive. Andrade (2006) studied international students in higher education institutions in English-speaking countries and reported that adjustment challenges were primarily attributable to English language proficiency and cultural differences. Yeh and Mayuko (2003) also identified that lack of language proficiency and cultural knowledge contributed to the sub-par academic experience. Accordingly, Yeh and Mayuko (2003:133) recommend the following:

As nations set strategies to attract international students, they must also consider the educational and cultural experiences of these students in the destination country. Institutions cannot simply admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to life in a new country and educational system without appropriate support and programming.

Yeh and Mayuko's recommendation can be noteworthy for Japanese universities, as these universities endeavour to motivate the "establishment of positions in student services, improvement of counselling activities, the appointment of advisers, and organisation of peer support groups" (Oba 2007:296). Likewise, as discussed later in this chapter, the student support system at Hiroshima University was designed to provide peer-to-peer extracurricular assistance to newly-arrived international students (HU International Centre 2015), as they faced language barriers and lack of knowledge while signing utility contracts, such as electricity, water and cell phones. Thus, the student support system is expected to offer educational benefits to students, such as international and intercultural understanding and an increased interest in international cooperation (HU International Centre 2015). The personal reflections presented in this chapter can help in understanding the impact of the student support system at universities.

Additionally, the above issues also provide a *terminus a quo* for my research experience at a Japanese university.

Among others, I reflect on my expectations and motivation to study in Japan, the interdisciplinary research programme I was enrolled in, the research supervision I experienced, the student support service I accessed, the cultural encounter, the research training I underwent and the supportive climate at my graduate school. The conclusion reports how the experiences might benefit other researchers, practitioners and policymakers while also underscoring the limitations of personal experience as research evidence.

7.3 Biographical Information

To begin with, it is necessary to provide a brief biography of myself to help the reader make sense of my experience as a graduate student at a Japanese university. I am a Malawian man, and at the time of writing this chapter, I was in the age range of 30–35 years. I am a lecturer at the Education Foundations Department, School of Education, University of Malawi. I was awarded a Japanese Government (MEXT) scholarship and completed my Ph.D. in Education at the Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation, Hiroshima University, Japan. I spent five years at Hiroshima University, which involved completing my first two years of a Master of Education degree, and an additional three years for a Ph.D. degree. I specialise in educational development, including content areas of instructional technology, faculty development, comparative education, international cooperation in education and teacher education and professionalisation. My doctoral dissertation and master's thesis explored the theme of technology integration in teachers' education.

Prior to joining Hiroshima University, I served as an instructor in the Education Foundations Department at the University of Malawi where I am also currently based. I joined the University of Malawi as an academic staff member two years after completing my Bachelor of Education degree majoring in African social history at the same university. Currently, a great part of my research is committed to

understanding the intersection of information technology and teacher education, especially how the educators of teachers integrate technology into their work. This research commitment is premised on the fact that teacher educators play an important role in preparing prospective and in-service teachers to integrate technology into their classrooms. So far, I have presented this research at several local and international conferences, delivered invited talks and published it in peer-reviewed journals and popular media.

7.3.1 Expectations and Motivation to Study in Japan

As already stated, international students are attracted to studying in Japan for various reasons. In my case, although I did not have concrete expectations from the Japanese university education system, in hindsight, I noticed that I was attracted to study in Japan due to the availability of financial assistance under the Japanese Government (MEXT) scholarship. This study-abroad opportunity was also necessary for developing my academic career at a public university in Malawi. In my application for enrolment at Hiroshima University, I indicated the following:

I intend to study teacher education (Master's Degree) at Hiroshima University. Proceeding from my undergraduate programme which focused on teaching studies, my special interest is in educational technology, and my tentative research area is to evaluate some teacher education programmes regarding how they prepare student teachers to use modern technologies in the teaching and learning process. This evaluative study builds on my previous experience since at the undergraduate level I also did an evaluative study. More importantly, the research also builds on my current exposure to educational technology as a discipline because I am teaching similar content at the University of Malawi.

The above extract suggests that I expected to expand my knowledge of what I was teaching at the University of Malawi.

In my first year of study, my initial impression was that the programme of study was not relevant to the area I wanted to specialise in. There was also less emphasis on competitive examinations, as was the case with my undergraduate experience in Malawi. Instead, the emphasis was on ‘doing’ research and working in collaboration with others. I also needed to resolve some tensions, especially to strike a balance concerning the expectations of my employer, the focus of the programme I was enrolled in and the expectation of MEXT that funded my studies. However, five years into the interdisciplinary degree programme, I realised that the programme helped me define my field of study and focus on instructional technology, which would be useful to my work. In other words, my programme experience conformed to my expectations. In the next section, I elaborate on the interdisciplinary research programme I pursued at Hiroshima University.

7.3.2 Interdisciplinary Research Programme

Since their incorporation in 2004, national universities in Japan “have been increasingly cultivating interdisciplinary research programs to better meet the needs of society and to maintain and strengthen their scientific excellence” (Oba 2007:295). This was the case when I was a student at the Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation at Hiroshima University, as shown in Figure 7.1, which is a screenshot of the school website.

Partnership Between Universities in Japan and South Africa

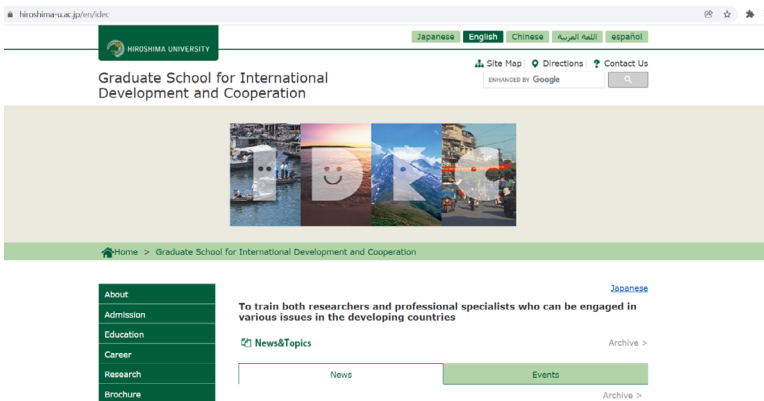


Figure 7.1: Webpage for the Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation

The programme provided me with a starting point to understand educational issues in developing countries. I enrolled in an educational development programme, which allowed me to study diverse programmes such as Asian cultures, international relations, international cooperation in education, local curriculum development and global citizenship. The multidisciplinary nature of my programme helped me approach my research through multiple perspectives. The committee for my doctoral dissertation also included professors from diverse fields such as anthropology, science education, educational technology, teacher education and African studies.

7.3.3 Student Support Services

Oba (2007) points out student support services as one of the significant efforts that national universities have been focusing on to become more internationalised. I experienced this feature at the Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation. The student support division played an active role in guiding course registration. I also learned that the academic advisor is critical in meeting student needs, although this seems to depend on individual advisors. For instance, during the 2018 floods, when the supermarkets

were inaccessible, my academic advisor volunteered to drive me to the supermarket to get provisions. Furthermore, when I first arrived as a master's student in 2016, I was allocated a 'student supporter', a Japanese student who helped me settle, including getting contracts for housing, telephone, banking, electricity and water. In the next section, I discuss the same student support system. This is relevant because my experience with a student supporter at Hiroshima University also helped me gain insight into some of the most subtle aspects of Japanese culture. As presented in the next section, I began to get a sense of work ethics, language and a general view of life from a Japanese perspective.

7.3.4 Cultural Encounter

According to Leask (2009), improved interactions between domestic and international students depend on how formal and informal curricula encourage and reward intercultural engagement. Leask (2009:205) recommended an internationalised curriculum, "which requires a campus environment and culture that obviously motivates and rewards interaction between international and home students in and out of the classroom". In Japan, there are reports of inward-looking youth, which means that the youth show less interest in overseas experiences. This necessitates the need for intercultural experiences at Japanese universities. For instance, Morita (2014:1) reported low levels of intercultural interaction between Japanese and international students. When I was a student at Hiroshima University, I learned that the student support system was designed to provide participating students with educational and cultural experiences. In one of my master's coursework for the subject called Fieldwork Methodology in Educational Development, I had an opportunity to interview student supporters to understand their experience of working as student supporters. One of the student supporters reported that she had become a student supporter to improve her communication. As such, she considered the following as one benefit of being a supporter: "... to get [the] chance to speak English ... and to understand

other cultures”. Apart from communication, student supporters also learn about the cultures of international students. The benefits align with the findings of NAFSA’s (2003) study reporting the role of international students in enhancing understanding of other cultures and the world at large.

I also believe there was a cultural and language gap between international and Japanese students in their daily lives. For instance, one student supporter informed me that

... foreign students had problems in understanding Japanese. So, when they do anything they face problems ... if they want to make a contract for a cell phone [connection], water, or electricity they need support from Japanese students ... but usually Japanese students don’t care about foreign students ... so, I got in this situation. (Interview with student supporter, 23/12/2016)

These gaps also exist among domestic students. For instance, while reflecting on lessons learned from supporter experience, one student supporter observed that

Japanese people [maintain] a distance when we communicate with each other ... [Japanese people are] not so friendly with fellow Japanese students ... *hie ... konnichiwa ... hie hie ...* I don’t care ... don’t look at me ... I focus on my job, something like that. Japanese people tend to be like that ... In Japanese [culture, there is] no hugging, especially with strangers, when I see Japanese [people] whom I have not met before ... They feel very nervous and don’t talk too much. (Interview with a student supporter, 23/12/2016)

This observation shows that, through their work, student supporters can develop a sense of peace and coexistence, including global citizenship skills through intercultural experience.

In summary, my view is that the student support system provides the faculty with the means to appreciate a new culture while helping international students settle and adjust in Japan. On the other hand, interaction with the student support system is characterised by the tribulations and struggles of cultural diversity. While tolerance is a solution to peaceful coexistence, more effort should be made to guard against superior-versus-inferior intercultural comparisons between international and Japanese students.

7.3.5 Research Training

Before joining Hiroshima University, I had undergone introductory courses on research methods for education and history as part of my undergraduate studies at the University of Malawi. I also conducted fieldwork, based on which I wrote a qualitative dissertation focusing on Indian immigrants and settlements in Malawi. This undergraduate research training introduced me to the basic principles of conducting research. Overall, my undergraduate research training prepared me for postgraduate research. Thereafter, when I joined Hiroshima University, my research approach was influenced by my previous training. In my research lab, most research topics were qualitative. The learning activities took the form of research seminar presentations.

I also recall that “research as a daily meal” was the motto of our research laboratory, which essentially meant that students were expected to work regularly to make progress. I found this motto motivating, as it pushed me to work on my research. The other ‘philosophy’ of our academic advisor was to develop a “self-regulatory researcher”, meaning that students would be in control of their research. In this way, the academic advisor exemplified the balance between guiding the students on one hand and helping them become autonomous on the other. This philosophy also helped me because it allowed me to make mistakes, learn from them and revise accordingly. Many of the seminar presentations adopted a collaborative learning approach, where students learned implicitly or explicitly from each other. For example, after

each presentation, the academic advisor asked other students to comment, ask questions and suggest changes. Based on such contributions of other students, the presenter reflected on changes to be made and communicated from where they would begin the next presentation.

7.3.6 Supervision

It is noteworthy that research students are less likely to complete their degrees if they experience poor supervision (Ginns, Marsh, Behnia, Cheng & Scalas 2009). In this section, I reflect on the research supervision I experienced at Hiroshima University. The following extract from the acknowledgement section of my doctoral dissertation summarises my supervision experience:

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the following people and institutions that rendered their support throughout my PhD journey. My academic advisor for his guidance, encouragement, and setting reasonable expectations that I should aim to achieve in my doctoral research. My professional growth this far is a result of his consistent effort in providing the resources I needed, as well as numerous learning opportunities such as exposure to the international community through conference presentations, and offering academic support to my fellow students.

The above extract suggests that I received the necessary support from my academic advisors, especially in terms of diverse learning experiences. I attributed much of my professional growth to these experiences. I also recall reporting similar support when I was interviewed by my fellow student of Vietnamese nationality, who was interested in understanding my study experience as an international student in Japan.³ The video was recorded to inform prospective international students interested in studying at a

3 YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZDdOqifmLU>

Japanese university. Figure 7.2 illustrates one of my research outputs, as encouraged by my academic advisor when I was a master's student.

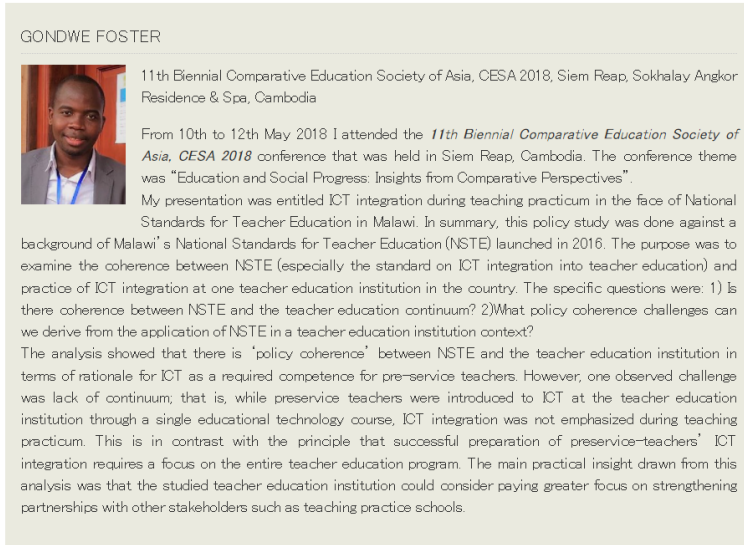


Figure 7.2: International Conference Presentation with Support from the Graduate School

Since Figure 7.1 also relates to the overall educational support I received from the graduate school, in the next section, I reflect on the supportive climate at Hiroshima University.

7.3.7 Supportive Climate

My experience regarding a supportive climate as a developing researcher is similar to what a fellow Malawian student at Hiroshima University, Tabitha Kayira, said in her graduation ceremony speech on 20 September 2020. Tabitha earned her Ph.D. in food science from the Biosphere Science Department at Hiroshima University. Similar to her, I arrived in Japan with mixed feelings: excited and yet afraid of what would become of me in a foreign land. On the one hand, I was afraid of how I would communicate with people, especially because of my limited Japanese language skills. On the other hand, Japan

is known for its high-tech and innovative industry, so I was excited that I would study in such an enabling environment. Indeed, my research was supported by not only high-tech and sophisticated equipment but also supervision and guidance by a team of professors committed to their work. As such, at Hiroshima University, I earned more than one academic qualification.

The support I received from my academic advisor prompted me to rethink how to approach the supervision of my prospective research students at the University of Malawi. My advisor provided more than academic support. Similar to Tabitha, I learned about the government's and private sector's commitment to investing in scientific research at a university. I believe that such investments and collaboration ensure the continued relevance of the university in generating knowledge and evidence to inform various development efforts at the national level. I also observed an invaluable shared commitment by both professors and students to effectively run and manage the affairs of research laboratories, the sense of ownership and responsibility and the necessity to be considerate of the next person using the lab. These shared ideals inspired by diligent professors and obedient students not only smoothen lab operations but also train scholars to become leaders in their own right, typified by a blend of intellect and character.

7.4 Conclusion

The transformation of national universities into independent agencies has sought to strengthen the global competitiveness of Japanese higher education. Since hosting international students seems to be a strategy to improve competitiveness, understanding international students' experiences can add to the knowledge base and improve the learning conditions of international students in Japan. Through my experience, I observed that my participation in academic conferences, clarity of our research lab 'philosophy', the degree of autonomy that my academic advisor accorded me, access

to appropriate and sufficient resources for research and the opportunity to support fellow graduate students enhanced my research training at Hiroshima University.

However, it should be noted that there is also a limitation to this experience. The chapter is based on personal reflections, notes during graduate studies and a review of the literature, which means the 'findings' are mostly subjective. However, my experience resonates with Ginns et al. (2009), who observed that research students may be unwilling to complete their degrees if they experience poor supervision, an unsupportive climate and inadequate infrastructure. These personal reflections can contribute to the development of measures to gauge students' perceptions regarding the quality of their research training at Japanese universities. By exploring an African student's study experience in Japan, this chapter also maintains that the internationalisation of higher education is required in Japan.

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