My Life in Japan

Many foreigners expect Japan to be very different from their home country. Some are influenced by anime and manga that have spread in the west like a wildfire over the past 2 decades, others associate Japan with its temples, samurai, or sushi. Of course, I had similar expectations when I first came to Japan some 8 years ago. Very soon, I learned that Japan is not so different from Germany, but also understood that I could never learn all facets of the Japanese society, and its education system in merely a year. I decided to return to Japan to learn more about the life and research of a student at a Japanese university. I studied at Osaka University under Prof. Kiyokawa for 4 years, before graduating the PhD program in 2016. Since my graduation, I am working at the Kato-Sandor laboratory at the Nara Institute of Science and Technology as an Assistant Professor. This article is based on the experiences I made as an exchange student, PhD student, and employee at a Japanese university.

Fascination Japan

The number of exchange students coming to Japan has been on the rise for more than 10 years. When I first joined the NUPACE exchange program of Nagoya University in 2008 it had grown to 70 participants and the staff were very proud and happy with its growth from 50 participants in 2000. The program experienced a continuous rise in participants and supported as many as 150 exchange students last year. Japan has a magical fascination to Asians and Westerners students alike. Visitors can experience the flair of Japan (Fig. 1), festivals uncommon to their homeland (Fig. 2), but at the same time witness the modern society of Japan with

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its love for robots, innovative technology, and skyscrapers. Sometimes, the ancient and the modern Japan are only a few meters apart. Despite the beauty of Japan, my biggest shock right after my arrival were the missing trash bins in the streets and strict recycling rules in the dormitory.

Although many universities have student groups and societies who seek to meet and help foreign students, conversation with other students is difficult if you can't speak Japanese. After about 6 months of studying Japanese in an exchange program, students can achieve a conversational level of proficiency, which helps in everyday life and allows them to communicate with their peers at a fundamental level. While it is true that exchange students can make friends among other participants of the exchange program, there is a certain exhilaration when you talk to a Japanese in their native language for the first time. I often remember the time I spent in the Volleyball club of the Osaka University. Although the training regime was close to overwhelming, 3-4 hours/4 times a week, it was an amazing opportunity to experience the life of a regular student. I could witness their devotion to the training and pursuit of the victory, as well as participate in the biggest event of the year, the Seven Universities Athletic meet. I believe that this would not have been possible without the language classes I took during the program.

Despite improving my language skill, in the end it was not enough to take classes with my peers. Even now, there are only a few classes being taught in English at local universities. In an increasingly intertwinable world with a continuously increasing number of foreigners coming to Japan, it is imperative to enable students to complete their studies without devoting years of preparation. As it stands, most foreigners who would like to come to Japan to study can’t do that as they would not understand the classes or the questions during the exams. To help students with their classes and projects all students who too part in the NUPACE program were assigned to a laboratory. Through interaction with other students in the laboratory and my supervisor, I understood that the Japanese approach to education is very different from the BSc and MSc programs in Germany. It became my goal to return to Japan to experience the life of a Japanese researcher, which I could achieve 2 years later for my MSc thesis and later during my PhD.

### University education

When talking to students during my exchange and PhD, I was often surprised by their expectations from their studies and their motivation to select the respective majors. Many students expressed that they had no intention to work in the field they were studying. As a German student, I felt that this made little sense. However, I came to understand that this is a result of the Japanese hiring and working policies.

While it is relatively easy to enter the university in Germany, students have to pass a number of hard exams that ensure that only those who are fit for the respective major and put in enough effort receive a degree. I have met students who had very bad grades in school, as they were not interested in the majority of the classes. However, these students graduated from top universities in Germany, as they were studying a major that they were interested in. Due to the rigorous testing and future prospects it is not uncommon to meet students who had to drop out or decided to change their major before finally graduating. In Japan, on the other hand, students face a very tough entrance exam. As the admission to the university is decided solely from the test results, it makes entry to the top universities very difficult, especially in highly competitive courses. At the same time, after enrolling the number of students who fail an exam, drop out, or change their major is very small. Furthermore, companies tend to hire students from top universities regardless of their major. It is thus no surprise that students tend to decide what they study based on their general interests, or what enables them to enter the university they aim for, rather than prospects of finding a position in that field.

The different expectations from education of university graduates also become apparent in different approaches to job hunting in Germany and Japan. In Germany, most students begin their job search when their graduation is almost ensured, or after receiving their degree. Students graduate throughout the year, and companies advertise positions throughout the year. The job market has evolved compared to 10 or 20 years ago, with unlimited employment becoming a rarity for young graduates. Employees should be willing to move to a new city and seek new employers when they believe that they are ready to move on. This system is very similar to the American system that offers a lot of opportunity, but also uncertainty. To account for varying market
conditions, companies look for staff that can start as soon as tomorrow. Furthermore, companies do not want to devote months for employee training. They want to hire specialists who know the field they are applying for and can be tasked with responsibilities after a very short introduction period. Therefore, graduates are expected to have thorough knowledge of the field, and ideally some practical skills that were acquired during part-time jobs or internships.

In Japan, job hunting is a very fascinating ritual that begins over a year before it becomes evident that the student will graduate. Most graduates seek a life-time employment in one of the big companies, e.g., Sony, Toshiba, Toyota, etc. Hereby, the majority choose the general employment path that leaves their future up to the companies. After receiving a positive notification, students learn their future assignment on the first day at the job. During my PhD I asked one of our graduates, if he knew what he will do after he got employed. Despite having an MSc in Computer Science, he replied that he may end up working the construction line in the factory. Of course, we were both aware that this was probably not the case, but it highlights the underlying problem. If the students’ future job may be unrelated to their studies, what do they go to the university for? At the same time, receiving an employment guarantee half a year, to a year in advance often diminishes the student’s motivation to do their best for their graduation thesis. Why should you work hard, if the bare minimum gives the same results?

**Being a foreign staff member**

When I started as a PhD student, I had very different expectations of what it would be. By observing and talking to PhD students in Germany I expected that a big portion of my time will be devoted to work on a project that fits my interests. A large portion of projects in Germany is at least in part in collaboration with the industry and the results of these projects are later combined into the dissertation. However, from the beginning it became clear, that Japan has a very different approach. Students are expected to come up with their own research topics and there is very little collaboration with the industry. After thorough consideration and trying different topics I managed to find a suitable research topic through advice from my predecessor, Dr. Christian Nitschke. After my graduation (Fig. 3) I wanted to work with Prof. Kato and Prof. Sandor who are well known in my field of research to better understand the environment and approaches taken at different laboratories.

I consider myself lucky to work at the Kato-Sandor laboratory. With a foreign student body of almost 50%, with almost equal parts of Asian and Western foreigners (Fig. 4), it is an amazing environment to work as a researcher. Since I joined the MSc program at TU Munich I was fascinated with computer vision and augmented reality. As optical see-through head-mounted displays are a natural interface for augmented reality I wanted to make the interaction with these as intuitive as possible. At the Kato-Sandor laboratory I met researchers who pursue the same goal (Fig. 5) with different ideas on how to achieve it, and students who are enthusiastic and eager to learn. The large variety of nationalities also highlights different mentalities and ideas. I believe that such a diverse environment is also beneficial for our Japanese students, who can improve their
English skills, and learn more about internationalization and foreign culture in a multicultural environment.

However, sometimes it is still difficult to share ideas due to the language barrier. Nonetheless, through efforts from both sides we are able to communicate and progress the research towards the common goal. I believe that my experiences as a PhD student in Japan are very helpful in this. For one, my Japanese skills are sufficient to communicate with my students, and exchange ideas. I am also able to help foreign students who have very different expectations to adjust to the Japanese research environment and can support them in their endeavors. My goal is to create an environment that demands students to achieve good results and put in a lot of effort; but at the same time helps them grow as researchers and specialists who will be highly sought after by the industry.

Me joining NAIST comes at a time when Japanese universities have declared internationalization of their staff and improving their ranking, compared to other universities in the world, as one of their primary goals. However, it is not enough to just hire foreign staff. Foreign researchers who have not studied Japanese face very similar problems as exchange students. They have problems communicating with the staff, their neighbors, and of course their students. This limits their ability to acquire research grants, support the research and growth of students in their labs, and overall often leaves them alienated. At some point every researcher has to make the decision, do they seek to further their career in Japan, or should they go to a different country. Feeling integrated and welcomed is important to keep promising researchers from moving on. Some universities and companies have recognized this need, e.g., the faculty meetings at Keio University are held in Japanese to accommodate their foreign staff, at NAIST interpreters help facilitate the discussions between the faculty, and Rakuten declared that the official language at the company will be English and they will hire throughout the year. Nonetheless, there is still a lot to be done.

**An outlook**

Even after 6 years in Japan, it’s culture and homogeneous society continue to amaze and impress me. The fascination of Japan on young people around the world can be seen in the ever-increasing number of tourists, exchange students and international researchers. Sometimes, I remember with nostalgia the first time I came to Japan. With only 2 German students in the entire exchange program people were often surprised just to meet a German, which led to many unique experiences. These days, there is a large number of German students at many universities, and a large number of German tourists. People are getting used to interacting with foreigners in their everyday life. I believe that in the long run this will improve their integration into the Japanese society. Until then, foreign staff and their employers have to work together to overcome the cultural and language barriers to create the most ideal situation that benefits both parties.

At the same time, I am convinced that the Japanese education system must, and will, evolve to stay competitive with the vast majority of entrepreneur movements around the world. This change however can’t be enforced by the universities, as it is part of a much larger system that incorporates the society, companies, schools, education, and maybe even “the Japanese way of life”. After witnessing the small, but nonetheless important, changes that happened since I first came to Japan I am confident that Japan will successfully embrace the change and adapt to the globalized world.

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