

IEICE Global Plaza no.14

— Monthly community plaza in English for students, faculties and engineers —

Essay

◆◆ Voice of Students ◆◆

Life of an international student in Japan



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It is my great pleasure to have this opportunity to talk on my opinion of participating in academic activities through opportunities of presentation in conferences or paper publication as provided by academic institutions like IEICE, as one of foreign graduate students studying in Japan. I wish this contribution will be a driving force to activate discussions between younger generation who are studying in Japan as well.

In earlier times, higher education in Japan was limited due to the language barrier. As a country built upon the excellence of its technological innovations, Japan is truly an important destination for anybody seeking for higher studies in the area of technology. The number of companies that base it on businesses around technological innovations in Japan is astounding. But the need to learn Japanese in order to carry out studies has usually kept many foreign students and researchers away from Japan. It is all changing now and has been for a while. Major universities in Japan are starting to provide education in English now. This is not limited to major private universities like Keio or Waseda, even public universities like University of Tokyo are providing this facility. This has opened a wide gate to the world of technological researchers to enjoy the advancements which Japan has to offer.

I am one of those who got the opportunity to pursue higher education in Japan, in the prestigious Keio University. As a kid I used to visit Japan many times before starting my graduate studies in 2005. Japanese technology had always fascinated me, as it has done for everybody all around the world, and it was a major goal of mine to come here for my higher studies. It's been little more than 4 years now and below I will try to summarize the experience I have had so far. I joined the Sasase laboratory under the supervision of Prof. Iwao Sasase (see their activities at <http://www.sasase.ics.keio.ac.jp>). I started my masters' degree at Keio University in the "International Graduate Program" (IGP) with "Monbukagakusho" scholarship from the Japanese government. IGP provides the opportunity for international students to enroll in graduate studies who do not possess the ability of Japanese language (See the details of IGP at http://www.st.keio.ac.jp/english/admissions/masters_program/international_graduate.html).

A large subset of the courses is given in English language which lets the international students fulfill their credit points while also encouraging us to take the Japanese language courses. The main difference in Japanese universities as I see is the concentration they put on the research. Also there is quite a diversity in the research to be conducted. For example, in my lab there are three major areas of research: wireless, optical and

security (See the topics at <http://www.sasase.ics.keio.ac.jp/theme.html>). A recent video interview summarizes the research themes in my laboratory and also an introduction to the Sasase lab (See the relevant video materials which are available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAJYf8T7X3k&feature=channel>). In the master's program, students are constantly encouraged to publish papers and participate in domestic and international conferences. I find this quite different from universities in other parts where students mostly concentrate on taking courses and spending more time on doing assignments and reports and extensive final examinations. Many students have master's degrees which can be obtained just by coursework and where no research is needed. There is no such system here. Every student must publish and most importantly present in a conference in order to graduate. Doing research and writing about it are two completely different things, which I found out first hand and each is equally important.

When attending domestic technical conferences in Japan, the actual conference is half of the experience (Fig.1). Usually these conferences are held in regional academic centers or institutions with historical or topographical backgrounds like Hokkaido or Osaka, where the participants can indulge themselves in other



Fig.1 From the presentation of research outcome on the occasion of an IEICE technical conference at Hokkaido University

things like enjoying the cultural heritage of the area or going to hot springs, which are my favorites. A traditional Japanese meal usually follows and everybody enjoys the time talking, eating and drinking. This atmosphere creates a good opportunity to get to know many people. Some are graduate students, some are researchers from the industry, while some are prominent academics from universities.

The Institute of Electronics, Information, and Communication Engineers (IEICE) is the IEEE equivalent in Japan and is the major engineering society. IEICE organizes many domestic technical conferences which I mentioned in the previous paragraph. IEICE also has high standard journals. Not only Japanese academics but also lots of other international authors also publish their research in IEICE journals. There are two important facts about IEICE: Journals in English medium and punctuality. Ability to publish in English is definitely an important advantage to the international researchers. And the most impressive is the punctuality of the process, like everything else in Japan. The initial review process, for example, is completed within 3 months. And you will most definitely get reviews in so short time whereas some journals could take much longer.

There are many activities that help you get away from a seemingly routine research life. Drinking parties are held several times a year to celebrate many occasions. Many of the lab members together with the Lab professor participate in these and enjoy a loud fun filled night. And then there are 'wine parties', quite a specialty of my lab. Our lab has a long tradition of every

student bringing a bottle of wine when they participate in international conferences. With frequent participations of these conferences we are able to have these parties several times a year. This brings me to mention about the participation in international conferences. I went to my first international conference when I was in the masters' program in Keio University. The support and encouragement provided by the lab on this must be highly appreciated. Participation in an international conference can be very expensive. There are lots of occasions in other countries (including mine) where students usually do not get the chance to participate in these because of the high cost. Sometimes the supervising professor will participate in the conference leaving out the student. These can be discouraging experiences to a student. But here international conferences are given top priority. The supervising professor always takes the full responsibility of providing the student with the monetary support for the participation. Students are able to submit their papers to conferences without having to worry about the burden of the finances.

Apart from the support received from ones labs, there are other ways to get support too. First are financial grants provided by companies for the purpose of going to international conferences. As a country based on it's technological advancements, the companies in Japan fully understand the importance of supporting researchers. This is a remarkable characteristic of Japan which I really admire. And then there is the Global Center of Excellence (GCOE) program initiated by the Japanese government. In this program, the government chooses some universities which are contributing to the technology in Japan and provides them a large financial funding to advance the research efforts. Under this program many activities and programs are initiated. For example, students have workshops with universities in other countries. As for me, I got a chance to participate in workshops in France and Belgium. This gives a unique experience. In addition to sharing research ideas, we get the chance to experience first hand how research is actually done in other universities. This helps us advance our own research methodologies. Additionally, we also have poster presentations, PhD forums, panel discussions, etc., under the GCOE program. An added advantage of this project is that, because there are students from number of research fields, everybody working in a common program gives the chance to learn about other research fields too. There are four groups in our GCOE program and a large group consists of students working in the field of nanotechnologies. Although I work in the area of telecommunications, we also get a substantial understanding of the fundamental concepts of these technologies.

To wrap up this small introduction to research life in Japan, I have to say it has been an adventure. Life inside the university can be easy but outside of it, without Japanese it gets a little difficult. But the naturally helpful nature of the Japanese community is invaluable for us foreign students in everyday life. As someone who has quite minimal Japanese skills, I am sometimes surprised how patient Japanese people are with me when I go to an office or a shop. Before I finish off let me tell you about the one technology in Japan which truly blew me off: the raw speed of the internet connections. It is simply amazing how an advanced optical infrastructure Japan possesses. The speeds are in the tens of megabits range for each individual connection and I do not mean on paper. It truly is that fast. Many of you might not agree with me, but as far as I am concerned, this is a remarkable technological achievement that Japan is able to really provide the consumers with a 'truly' broadband experience.

Finally I would like to send out this message, "Life in Japan is a unique experience. Japanese society is high paced. Yet amid all that restlessness, there are certain components of calmness in their culture which I cannot put into words. Let's experience it." (This article was submitted on the cooperation of the author and his advisor, Prof.Iwao Sasase, Keio University, to the request of TFIPP. Any positive contributions are welcome to be published.)

Useful Remarks

"Web Site for International Students" of the Society helps your study life in Japan



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The IEICE Engineering Sciences Society commenced and has managed "WebSite to support international student" since September 2006 (See the details of the WebSite at <http://www.ieice.org/ess/essint/index-j.html>). The purpose of the Site is to support international students studying the relevant field in Japan so that their study and academic activities will be promoted and activated.

The primary contents are:

"International Student Life" which provides the information useful for people who are trying to study in Japan, students studying in Japan, graduates from Japanese universities/institutions trying to be employed in Japan.

"School Life" which introduces the meaning and procedure of paper submission, conference calendar covering conference/symposium/workshop organized by the Society or Technical Committees under the Society, information of outstanding international conferences in or outside of Japan, relate to the special fields of the Society.

"News through institutional activities of IEICE" which covers the presentation of research activities, awarding, research topics through PhD degree dissertation, academic activities in IEICE, with contributions and photos.

The other contents are planned to cover useful advices or experience in paper submission, in the near future. Whenever you have any opinion to enhance our services for international students, do not hesitate to get in touch with us at essint-happvo-news@mail.ieice.org.

IEICE's International Conferences

APSITT 2010 - IEICE Communications Society

The 8th Asia-Pacific Symposium on Information and Telecommunication Technologies (APSITT 2010) : at Kuching in East Malaysia on June 15-18 in 2010. See details at <http://www.ieice.org/cs/in/APSITT/2010/>.

APARM 2010 - IEICE Engineering Sciences Society

The 4th Asia-Pacific International Symposium on Advanced Reliability and Maintenance Modeling (APARM 2010) at Wellington in New Zealand on December 2-4, 2010. See details at <http://msor.victoria.ac.nz/Events/APARM2010/>.

Message from TFIPP Secretariat

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