

Teaching Sabbatical – Final Report

Dan Öberg, UTokyo, Autumn, 2015

I would like to start out by offering my sincerest thanks on behalf of me, my partner and daughter, to STINT for making this trip possible. The five months at Tokyo University (UTokyo) were a fantastic experience and I believe that I have really evolved as a teacher and as a person from this experience. I would wholeheartedly recommend this experience to other Swedish university teachers.

Introduction

UTokyo has for a long time been considered one of the top, if not *the* top university both in Japan and in Asia. It was founded in 1876 and currently consists of 10 faculties (such as economics, law, medicine, arts and sciences and a number of other), 15 graduate schools and a numerous affiliated research associations.

In fact, what is today called Tokyo University is the result of a merging of a number of universities: Tokyo Medical School, Imperial College of Engineering, Tokyo School of Agriculture and Forestry and many more. The various faculties are therefore often similar in size and output to a normal Swedish university. The university staff, administration, teachers and researchers, consists of around 11,000 people (around 500 foreigners) and there are around 30,000 students enrolled at UTokyo every year.

UTokyo is principally located in three places in Japan: Hongo (the main campus), Komaba, both located in central Tokyo and Kashiwa, a campus for natural science in Chiba. I was assigned to Komaba campus which is located two stops west of Shibuya on Inokashira line. It took me 40 minutes by one way by subway from home to my office. There are also smaller campuses and research centers all over Japan associated with UTokyo. The school also has a number of international offices such as in India and in China.

In October 2015 UTokyo received the Nobel Prize, meaning, that a Nobel Prize was awarded to an alumnus from the school. This time it was Takaaki Kajita who received the Nobel Prize in physics. Since Kajita is relatively young he is still an active professor at the university (and

not an emeritus) something which makes him quite rare. Famous names of previous students also include laureates Kawabata Yasunari and Kenzaburo Oe (both in literature) and Eisaku Sato (who received the Peace prize in literature).

Traditionally UTokyo is considered an elite school and there are reports that around 80% of the politicians in the upper and lower house are graduates from UTokyo. Many of the previous prime ministers have graduated there, the most recent one being Yukio Hatoyama (prime minister until 2010).

UTokyo has two programs taught entirely in English which are focused on both Japanese and foreign students. These are held at the Komaba campus and are the International Program on Japan in East Asia and the International Program on Environmental Sciences. Most of the students that I taught were from the PEAK (Programs in English at Komaba) program. But as the courses are open to all students there are also some foreign exchange students and Japanese students. My teaching took place mostly in relation to PEAK but I also had a lot of foreign exchange students taking my courses.

Preparation and planning

The acceptance letter from STINT reached me on the 18th of December 2014. I started my preparations for going in January 2015. I contacted my academic contact person (Prof. Hidemi Takashi) and my contact for VISA and housing related matters (Prof. Keiko Matsui) in the beginning of February 2015. We planned my first trip to UTokyo together. It was decided that I would visit in the middle of April 2015 for 10 days. In Japan the spring semester begins in April and this enabled me both to visit classes and meet the other teachers at the PEAK faculty. The trip was of great help to give me a chance to prepare for taking my family to Tokyo. Both Prof. Takashi and Prof. Matsui were of exceptional help in preparing me for my stay at UTokyo. Before my trip I discussed what courses to teach mainly with Prof. Takashi (as representative of 1-2nd year students, so called Junior division) and with Prof. Shimizu (as representative of 3-4th year students, so called Senior division). Together we decided that I would teach courses that are close to my own research and that I would teach one course (of 2 credits) for the Junior Division students and one course (of 2 credits) for the Senior Division students.

My Junior Division course was to be called 'Gender and War' and it looked at the study of gender in relation to war, conflict and violence. The aim of the course was to provide an introduction to the role of gender in relation to the study of war with a focus on both the global and the Asian context. War is often considered a masculine activity characterized by military solutions to political conflicts and a focus on national security and interests. The course discussed what feminist perspectives on war contributes in terms of changing our understanding of the military, war and politics more generally, as well as differences between male and female experience of war, victimhood, agency and ethics. My Senior Division course was called 'Critical War Studies' and it introduces key thinkers in the critical study of war and explored the way war relates to politics and security. The key questions of the course were: (1) what is war (2) what does it mean to study war (3) in what way might we use critical war studies to better understand past and present East Asian Conflicts and security problems? This course was related both to my previous research and teaching.

Planning the courses was smooth and I experienced no problems worth mentioning. The most important aspect of the preparations was that UTokyo has a system which does not require a lot of administrative work. All I needed to do was to send Prof. Shimizu and Prof. Takashi a syllabus containing a brief outline of the course, the mandatory course literature as well as themes for the 15 lectures I would conduct. The professors were very supportive and encouraged me to plan my teaching the way it suited me. When I arrived in April I met with a number of additional professors and had the opportunity to discuss my courses more in-depth. This allowed me to understand the size of the lecture (between 10-20 students for both classes) and the level of skill of the students (for example the difference between Junior and Senior division students). I also went and saw a number of classes by other professors during this time. This is something I can highly recommend as it gave me an overall feel for the lectures and the university. I modelled my own course after the courses that I visited which saved time and made me able to avoid some potential pitfalls. For example, I realized that mandatory reading for one class needs to be around 20 pages (one article) something that was difficult for me to anticipate.

During my trip in April I also discussed my VISA applications. It was decided that I would use a Professors VISA. As I would travel with my civil law wife and our child (4 years) I wanted to obtain a family VISA. But that was not possible as Japanese law does not allow for family VISA's to unmarried couples. In the end my partner had to go to Japan on a tourist

VISA while I and my daughter obtained a family VISA. This was probably my only source of concern prior to going to Japan. But in the end it affected our stay only in the sense that my partner had to leave the country once (as tourist VISA's only allow for 90 days stay) so it did not become a problem.

During my trip I had the chance to visit the housing area that Prof. Matsui encouraged me to apply for. As she took care of the application process the whole thing was very easy. The dormitory was located in Shiroganedai and I visited it and got a chance to see the facilities and speak to the people in charge. Housing was affordable and the area was very convenient for families with children. It had parks, playgrounds and community center for children. There were also two international kindergartens within 500 meters from the dormitory. Finally we decided that as my classes start mid-September I would apply for a family room from September 1. The application was handled by Prof. Mitsui and I received a 3 room apartment (55 square meters) which contained furniture and was sufficient in every aspect. All in all this went without problems and I am very grateful to Prof. Mitsui for her excellent help.

As a whole the preparations went smooth and without problems. The information and help from STINT was clear and informative and I also received excellent help from Lelav Zandi and the other personnel at STINT with regards to this matter. If I would highlight one thing it would be that the workshop held at STINT at February 4 2015 was extremely useful as it enabled me to meet the previous Stintonian Thomas Lennerfors. The workshop really made planning and preparations easier and I hope STINT continues to hold this meeting annually.

Tasks and responsibilities

Upon arrival I received an office in one of the buildings at Komaba Campus at UTokyo. My main responsibility was to teach my two courses. I was told I had to teach the classes myself but I was awarded a teaching assistant for the Senior Division class. His name was Jun Nohara and his PhD topic was similar to the topic of the class and he was of great help to me, for example when it came to navigating everyday tasks. My TA came to all my lectures and functioned as an interface between me and the students. I had no mandatory responsibilities except for two classes each week (a total of 4 hours). There was no particular team-work

during the semester and I was left to conduct the classes the way I saw fit. I prepared around 4 hours for every hour of teaching which meant that at least 50% of my time went into teaching (excluding the exams). I say at least because being new in a place means everything from registration for emails, getting access to the library, and finding out how to use the interface to communicate with the students took time to learn. I also had a number of meetings and parties that I needed to attend and I was asked to present at a one day workshop about didactics (which I did). I would estimate that around 80% of my time went into teaching and the final 20% went into participating in embassy-related matters and meeting with colleagues. I also enjoyed the mid-term workshop to Singapore as it gave me a chance to compare my experience to the other Stintonians.

Activities during the semester

Everyone at PEAK spoke fluent English. I have lived in Japan and speak the language but I used Japanese only when talking to non-PEAK staff or students. The level of English of the staff was very good and this made course activities easy. The most important activity of the semester apart from teaching one's own course was something called the "Wednesday lunch meeting" (a faculty development lunch). This was a local meeting focusing on PEAK teachers. We met every Wednesday and discussed a predetermined topic (such as "teaching through social media", "how to conduct grading", "how to prepare your students for life after graduation" etc). Usually around 10 people attended the meetings. Once a month there was a meeting called "meet the Professors" which allowed the PEAK students to sit down with the professors to discuss whatever that was on their mind. Usually the discussion involved topics such as where to go for a Master's degree, how to apply for jobs in Japan or what to think of when leaving for winter vacation.

All in all I was surprised at how much the teachers at UTokyo focused on teaching, pedagogics, and didactics. Most university teachers at PEAK seemed to think of themselves as teachers rather than researchers. The atmosphere in Sweden is very different and the way I see it, at most Swedish universities research is valued highly. I can therefore recommend UTokyo in this respect as it really provided an atmosphere where teaching related matters were discussed daily. Outside of my duties at school I tried to visit my Alma Mater (Yokohama National University) and other universities. Thanks to a request from the Swedish

Embassy (Niklas Kviselius) I had the opportunity to have lunch with Helene Hellmark Knutsson and give my impression on working at a Japanese university. I also met with the Swedish military attaché (Michael Mineur) and participated in some other embassy related activities.

Important lessons

The way I see it two things stands out: (1) the fact that university teaching doesn't need to be constrained by complicated and arduous administrative procedures and (2) that an environment which values teaching (and the integration of teaching and research) might make learning more efficient. The first point is fairly simple and straightforward. At UTokyo there was little coordination between the various programs and courses (at least that I was aware of). This meant that every teacher had the responsibility for his or her courses. There were both mandatory courses (in methods for example) and elective courses (both my courses were elective). Particularly if you had elective courses you had a lot of freedom as a teacher. I think Swedish universities in general would benefit highly from increasing the number of elective courses on behalf of administration and bureaucracy.

Secondly, the American system adopted in Japan enables a situation where each course is smaller and easier to relate to one academic debate. In Sweden I often work on 10-week courses (15 hp). But I would say that the average 2 credit courses in Japan allows for more efficient learning than the equivalent in Sweden. It was obvious to me that as the students took between 7-12 courses for one semester and each course had a 2 hour lecture format which gave the students more classes and more seminars. Each student got more face-time with the teachers. In relation to this, the Japanese seminar system, the campus style housing (where both professors and students often live on campus), and the close relationship between professors and students create an environment which is perhaps more focused on learning than the average Swedish university.

Comparison between the foreign and the home institutions (in Sweden)

My Junior division class had 6 students and 3 so called 'listening students'. My senior division class had 15 students. In Sweden my classes range from 10 to 100 students. I noticed

that Japanese classes were held even if the number of students were very low (3 students was considered minimum if I understood the system correctly). There is not much to say about the number of students. One feature that surprised me was the system of ‘shopping around’ which meant that for the first 3 weeks students had the right to sit in on all the different classes. This made the number of students go from around 15 to 6 in my junior division class and from 30 to 15 in my senior division class. This made the preparations for my teaching a bit complicated at times (as it was difficult to plan progression since some students missed the first three lectures of the course). Another different feature was that the Junior Division course included both natural and social science students. As my course was a social science course I noticed that it was a bit more difficult for the students who had a natural science background and they had to work harder.

My students were from all over the world. In the Junior division class of my 6 students one came from China, 2 from Singapore, 2 from the United States, one from New Zealand, and 1 from India. The 3 listening students came from Japan. But many of the students had links to Japan (for example having one Japanese parent). In the senior division class 4 of the students were Japanese, 2 from Singapore, 2 from Sweden, 3 from France, 1 from China, 1 from Ireland, 2 from Australia and 1 from Hungary. The different nationalities of the students were the most challenging but also perhaps the most interesting part of the course.

As both my courses were about controversial topics that continue into the present I was constantly trying to conduct them in a way that did not offend or upset students of a particular nationality. We discussed the Second World War a lot during class (as well as the contemporary changes in the Japanese article 9, the so called “war-bill”) and it was obvious that the students national background affected the way they saw the issues. This is something very different from my teaching experience in Sweden. The different national discourses on war made me reflect a lot on how and what I teach. I realized that many of the texts that I think of as “normal” are fairly Eurocentric in approach and might not include certain war experiences. This has helped me to rethink the way I teach in this respect. I will try to change the curriculum of the courses that I teach in the future drawing from this experience.

As indicated previously, Komaba at UTokyo was a place which focused whole-heartedly on teaching. This was interesting and made it a good environment to discuss everyday matters that related to teaching class. I learned a lot from this. The balance between teaching and

research at Komaba seemed to be more 50-50 and many professors were “proud teachers”. The relationship between teacher and student was also different from Sweden. The students seemed to think of the Professors as people of higher social status. The relationship between Japanese students and professors is also more intimate and I tried as well as I could to make the students feel welcome. I also took all the students to dinner at the end of the semester as this was expected. This cost me a substantial amount of money but I had the feeling that both the students and the institution appreciated the gesture.

I was positively surprised regarding the level of the students. I was expecting the students to be ambitious as UTokyo is widely considered to be an “elite-school”. But the students surpassed my expectations in a positive way. Without exception the students read the material diligently, came prepared to discuss and had questions that were both relevant and interesting. This in turn made me prepare harder for each class. The students didn’t complain about the texts being difficult. Some of my students at UTokyo were only 17 years old and fresh from Senior high school. Despite this they read and understood texts that are fairly difficult even for a teacher. To work as a teacher in such an environment is very rewarding. Unfortunately the Junior division courses are ‘pass or fail’ courses which meant that the hard work of the students didn’t result in high grades. The senior division course was graded from A+, A, B, C, D. I was told to grade as I saw fit. The Wednesday meetings we had were very helpful here as it meant I got a chance to discuss the meaning of the grades with the other teachers. There was no discussion of grade inflation.

As UTokyo has smaller courses (each of the two credit courses is held once a week for 15 weeks) it also had a much bigger variety of choice compared to the average Swedish university. Every student had mandatory and elective courses and especially the elective courses were really cutting edge and innovative. When it comes to examination as with most other things that related to teaching I was told to conduct it the way I saw fit. I conducted an essay style examination (around 10 pages for each student, a take-home exam). As all the courses have exams at the same time it creates a situation where the students are extremely busy during the end of the semester. Each classroom had technological facilities in case one wanted to use them (video, power-point, audio and so forth). I used very little technology as I have limited need for it. Finally I would like to add that UTokyo focused a lot on preparing their students for life after graduating. This is something that Swedish universities might

consider as well as it would be useful both for the students and for companies and various organizations.

Action plan - topics to address and if possible introduce in Sweden

I have been invited to speak in a number of meetings about my experience in Japan. My first talk will be held next week (at FoUN at the Swedish Defense University). I have also been given a new role in the department at my school which involves more formal responsibilities with regards to teaching. I will focus my presentation on mainly three things: (1) the teaching environment (2) administration (3) the connection between research and teaching.

- (1) By teaching environment I will try to urge our university to value teaching higher. One way of changing this is by creating “carrots” for good teachers. My suggestion will be to create some kind of fund or award which is focused on teaching. At the moment all the funds that are possible to apply for internally are focused on research. One way of evaluating this would be through “peer-evaluation”.
- (2) The administration around courses in Sweden is more complex and involves much more man-power than the average Japanese course. This is to a great extent depending on Swedish law. I will do what I can to raise the issue of making course-preparation easier.
- (3) The connection between research and teaching. The thing that appealed the most to me in the Japanese system was the small courses. Instead of having 5 or 10 week courses each teacher got a small course linked to his or her research. I will suggest to significantly increase the number of courses and to separate them into mandatory and elective courses.