

STINT Teaching Sabbatical at the University of Tokyo, Japan – autumn term 2016-17

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I would like to start this report expressing sincere thanks to the STINT foundation, the University of Tokyo and the Linnaeus University in Växjö for making my teaching sabbatical possible. The entire stay has been mind-broadening and very rewarding for my family and myself and hopefully for the organisations involved, too.

The University of Tokyo

The University of Tokyo (UTokyo) is considered the most prestigious institution of higher education (HE) in Japan. In international comparison, both in Asia and on the global level, UTokyo has continuously assumed top rankings. The most recent addendum to the long list of Nobel laureates who produced substantial parts of their awarded research at UTokyo was Professor Yoshinori Ohsumi, the Nobel laureate in Physiology or Medicine in 2016.

Founded in 1877 UTokyo offers HE across the board on both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels organised in ten faculties and 15 graduate schools located on three main campuses in Tokyo: Hongo, Komaba and Kashiwa. UTokyo has more than 5,000 teaching staff and about 28,000 students, including both UG and PG students.

In UG education UTokyo adopts ‘(...) a flexible system integrating diverse and specialised education on a wide-ranging liberal arts foundation.’ (Charter of UTokyo). Diverse, liberal arts education is implemented through the College of Arts and Sciences in the first and the second years of UG education, the so-called ‘junior division’. Based on this, specialised education is implemented by the faculties in the third and fourth years, the ‘senior division’.

In 2012 two ‘Programs in English at Komaba’ (PEAK) were launched: ‘Environmental Sciences’ and ‘Japan in East Asia’. On the UG level of these programs, the basic idea of liberal arts college education is maintained with a modified curriculum. An important motivation of UTokyo to start PEAK was to promote diversification of the student body of UTokyo. Indeed a large number of PEAK students are from abroad and PEAK faculty has a

strong international background, too. Based on the Komaba campus I contributed to the implementation of the PEAK programs.

Preparation and planning

The STINT foundation informed me about my placement with UTokyo in the middle of December 2015. The information included two contact partners at UTokyo, one for academic affairs and another one for administrative affairs. I contacted both straight away.

In terms of administrative affairs the main issues to be resolved were visa matters; a work permit; and housing. At an early stage the colleagues at UTokyo made clear what documents were to be provided and when these needed to be available. They organised the work permit and the certificate of eligibility which allowed me and my family to apply for Japanese visa at the embassy in Stockholm. The application for a flat in one of the lodges of UTokyo was launched through the administrative contacts too. The procedure did not seem to be very transparent to an outsider. My application was turned down in several monthly award procedures. Only two weeks before our departure from Sweden we were lucky to get a very nice and, by Japanese standards, spacious flat on the campus of the medical institute of UTokyo in Shirokanedai from the middle of September. We managed to bridge some three weeks at the beginning of our stay with an airbnb apartment.

In terms of academic affairs agreement was to be achieved at an early stage with the program administrators on the courses I was going to offer. Based on experience with previous years' STINT fellows it was the expectation of the UTokyo that I was going to offer one course in the junior division and one course in the senior division. We agreed to '*The Politics and Economics of Sustainable Development*' in the junior division and '*The Political Economy of Globalisation and Regional Integration*' in the senior division. In February 2016 I was provided with access details for the administrative system of courses in the senior division and I was asked to upload the syllabus of my senior division course by the end of February.

In April I visited UTokyo for a five days planning trip. I was given a campus tour; attended a class of a philosophy course in the senior division; and participated in a staff meeting the main purpose of which was to discuss my teaching and the way it integrates into the different programs run by the department. Coordinators of different specialisation routes in the senior division asked for some changes in the syllabus, such as incorporating specific

topics, so that the senior division course could be offered as an elective to students of their respective specialisation as well. In addition to the academic purpose of the visit I collected information on the organisation of private life, inspected kindergartens and pre-schools and did inquiries into the private housing market etc.

In general all the preparation of the stay went smoothly. UTokyo shared all relevant information in due time to meet deadlines without any pressure. The communication was efficient, polite and characterised by mutual respect. All PEAK staff, in particular Professor Takashi Shimizo and Professor Shiho Maeshima, my main academic contacts, made me feel very welcome.

Tasks and responsibilities

My tasks and responsibilities at UTokyo were largely confined to the activities in relation to the delivery of my courses. These included the selection and distribution of course materials; monitoring student registration in the courses; the weekly delivery of a two hours class (a slot at UTokyo is 105 minutes) in each course over a period of 13 weeks; offering office hours and supervision in relation to student activities in the courses; setting and marking assignments and exams; providing substantial feedback to students on their performance; and reporting marks to the administration.

UTokyo provided necessary and very helpful support to deliver the courses beyond office and classroom space including a teaching assistant in the senior division course and a limited budget. The teaching assistant allocated to me was an advanced PhD student of art history whereas my courses were in social sciences/economics. This indicates an expectation for the division of labour between the course convenor and the teaching assistant at UTokyo. The teaching assistant's responsibilities are limited to administrative and organisational matters. In any case, given that I do not know Japanese, having a teaching assistant who knew the language facilitated communication with the administration of UTokyo though, in general, language did not turn out to be a major challenge. In any administrative department there was a contact person who knew English.

The budget was helpful to purchase stationary and books (obviously the library is excellent too). I gratefully acknowledge that a previous years' STINT fellow used the budget to buy a printer that I inherited and from which future STINT fellows will benefit as well.

Activities during the semester

Teaching did not start before 26 September 2016 and lasted till the second week of January followed by a two-weeks examination period. Arriving in Tokyo at the end of August there was plenty of time to get acquainted with administrative procedures and to sort out organisational matters such as library access, access to the IT network etc. Due to some incongruence of the term time with the period of the teaching sabbatical I could also use this time to reorganise my planned activities in January 2017 at my home university in Sweden.

My main activities related to the organisation, administration and delivery of my courses. This kept me busy on average some 25 hours per week. After a two-weeks orientation period (see below) 13 students registered in the junior division course and 17 students in the senior division respectively. Classes were delivered using methods that activate student participation. Lively and high-quality discussions indicated that the students appreciated this and were used to this. Assessment of individual student performance was based on the presentation of a short summary of assigned reading; a mid-term essay-type assignment; and a final in-class exam.

During the term period there was a weekly meeting of PEAK teaching staff at which matters related to course delivery were discussed including pedagogical methods, grading etc. Being aware from the reports of previous years' STINT fellows that these meetings were on Wednesdays I scheduled my courses on Mondays. Unfortunately this traditional 'Wednesday lunch meeting' had been moved to Mondays and clashed with my teaching so that I could attend only once. I tried to make up for this by having many ad-hoc lunches with individual colleagues of PEAK in order to discuss specific challenges in relation to my courses and to grasp the institutionalisation of liberal arts college education at UTokyo, an 'assignment' the rector of my home university had given me before my departure.

UTokyo offers an excellent research environment. I attended several research-related meetings of PEAK at which graduate students presented their research or external speakers gave a paper. Beyond PEAK, I regularly attended research seminars organised by the department of economics at the Hongo campus. This helped me develop contacts to colleagues who share my research interests. A bid for research funds materialised from this with the aim to secure resources for medium to long-term research cooperation.

Another activity I would like to highlight was the mid-term seminar of STINT fellows at Asian universities in Singapore. Whilst sharing experience with other STINT fellows was very valuable per se, the seminar came in conjunction with a study visit of top Singaporean universities and research institutes organised by STINT for representatives from Swedish higher education. Participating in the latter made the mid-term seminar a true highlight of the teaching sabbatical.

Important lessons

An important lesson of my stay is to appreciate careful student recruitment as an important contribution to the quality of an academic program. UTokyo believes that the liberal arts college educational system, as implemented here, crucially depends on the quality of the students. In order to get admitted to a UTokyo program, an applicant needs to pass two different entrance exams with top marks, the nation-wide National Center Test for University Admissions and a customised UTokyo exam. Likewise applicants for PG programs need to pass a multi-stage entrance examination. As for PEAK programs the last stage comprises personal interviews done by PEAK professors. It is remarkable that the interviews are not done in Tokyo but that the professors travel to various places of the world to meet the applicants. The university spends significant resources to select applicants into their programs that combine both outstanding intellectual capability and willingness to expense efforts on studying. Most professors at PEAK were to some extent involved in the screening process of applicants. Whilst it was obvious that the time they spent on the student recruitment would further reduce scarce research time, all professors seemed to agree that resources spent on careful student selection are an investment that eventually pays off.

Another lesson learned is that teaching a course in a liberal arts educational system is more demanding than in a program with a rather specialised curriculum. I would like to use an example of my teaching to make this point clear. My course on social sciences perspectives on sustainable development was attended by students of environmental sciences, engineering, history, philosophy and international relations. Some of these disciplines have fairly distinct perspectives on sustainability and on development that may differ significantly from the variety of social sciences perspectives. Discussions in the classes often focused on relating the concepts and approaches of the different disciplines to each

other which requires a lecturer to have sound knowledge of approaches beyond the own disciplines and to have good command of discursive skills. Likewise the variety of epistemological and ontological positions of the approaches from different disciplines brings about controversial discussions on the philosophy of science more frequently than in more specialised programmes. I found this rewarding and mind-broadening but at the same time demanding.

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

The liberal arts college concept involves that junior division students can select from a large variety of courses offered. In order to do well-informed choices students tended to attend a much larger number of courses during the first two weeks than they could actually negotiate through the entire term. Attendance during this selection period was almost three times as much as the number of students who eventually registered for the course. Asked for their selection criteria a non-representative sample of students stated to select on the basis of personal interest in the subject as well as the level of challenge the course posed. I found it remarkable that they were seeking the intellectual challenge rather than the opportunity of easy credits. This was particularly true for Japanese students whereas exchange students in the senior division, all from internationally top-ranked partner universities of UTokyo, seemed to expense less effort on their study.

The liberal arts college concept as implemented by UTokyo offers a convenor of a course more freedom and flexibility than I was used to at my home university in Sweden. Given that the course does not need to fit into a rather standardised curriculum that cannot be changed in the short run, a teacher is entirely free to choose the topic and the contents of a course. Designing a new course or changing the contents or the reading of an existing course does not require going through arduous time-consuming bureaucratic procedures on the level of the department or the faculty. A reduction of the administrative burden of teaching is just the most obvious benefit that accrues to the convenor of the course. A more important benefit for both the students and the convenor is that topics taught are much better aligned with individual research interests. Teaching tends to focus more on the cutting edge of research than on standardised textbook knowledge.

Students at UTokyo generally prepared classes well. Every week there was a reading assignment including some questions to reflect about that were meant to structure the

following class and to lead to a lively debate. This concept worked well both in the junior and the senior division classes. I found it remarkable that even students in the junior division seemed to prefer reading original articles that were seminal contributions to an academic debate rather than textbooks that tend to summarise the debate. Students at my home university tend to read more whereas students at UTokyo tend to read higher quality. Moreover, many students followed up on classes and asked for a deepening discussion of specific aspects during office hours or appointments. From these discussions it was clear that they generally grasped the concepts discussed in class and that they asked for further clarification, for instance, of links to concepts use in their core discipline.

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

A couple of actions are planned that can be classified under (i) short-term information sharing; (ii) contribution to pedagogical training of teachers; (iii) student selection; and (iv) broadening of education. Each of these will be sketched below.

- *Short-term information sharing:* Three events are being arranged that aim at sharing my experience gained at UTokyo with different stakeholders at the university. First, I am going to give a short presentation in the staff meeting of the department of social studies. Second, a presentation will be put on the agenda of the international committee of the LNU. Third, a presentation to anybody interested at the university has been scheduled on 30 March. Some presentations will probably be given jointly with another STINT fellow of the LNU who stayed during the same period at a North American university.
- *Contribution to pedagogical training of teachers:* The University Center for Educational Development (UCED) of the LNU is in charge for compulsory higher education teacher training, supervision in postgraduate programmes and educational development courses for university staff. I am discussing with the UCED forms of getting involved into the pedagogical training so that LNU staff beyond my faculty can benefit from my experiences. Options being discussed include in the short run to contribute a session to the compulsory higher education teacher training for newly hired teaching staff as well as in the medium term the organisation of an entire course on teaching in heterogeneous classrooms including students from different disciplines and different cultures and countries.

- *Student selection:* Being the co-director of the program ‘Master in Peace and Development Work at the LNU’, I am inter alia in charge for the selection of applicants into the program. Currently student selection is an administrative rather than an academic affair performed by the admission office of the LNU and supported by organizations external to the university such as www.universityadmissions.se. The involvement of academics is largely confined to the definition of admission criteria. Based on the experience in Japan I am launching a discussion aimed at involving academics stronger into student selection. This involves creating awareness among faculty of the benefits to be reaped in the long run from a better qualified and motivated student body. Requiring an essay or conducting a short skype interview with applicants are potential innovations worth trying. Moreover, securing resources for these activities from and agreeing to a division of labour with the administration is necessary.
- *Broadening of education:* According to the document ‘A journey into the future - vision and strategy 2015–2020’ the LNU is striving, inter alia, for challenging educations. Amongst the strategies to achieve this is to offer students a selection of courses with a *Bildung* perspective. This is built on ideas similar to the one underlying the liberal arts educational concept. Accordingly the rector of the LNU assigned me ‘a mission’, namely to look into how liberal arts college education is institutionalised at UTokyo and what lessons can be drawn for the LNU. I am preparing to report back to the rector on this, probably in the form of a presentation to the LNU committee on education.