

A peek into research life in Japan

~ An international group of researchers at Nagoya University discuss their experiences about research in Japan~

Coming to a different country to carry out research can be an exciting but daunting experience. Especially in Japan, where the language and culture are completely different to the rest of world, it is hard to imagine what to expect. To open doors to research in Japan, four postdoctoral researchers from Nagoya University (NU), including two researchers from ITbM, shared their experiences of working at Nagoya University, a national university, which is located in central Japan. This report is based on the discussion held on January 23, 2017.



Introduction of Participants:



Dr. Asraa Ziadi: “I was born in Iraq and lived in a few countries until my family settled down in Sweden when I was 12 years old. I went to Spain for my PhD and experienced a short exchange program in Japan during that time. I have always been travelling throughout my career. Now, I am at Nagoya University, working at the Institute of Transformative Bio-Molecules (ITbM) as a postdoctoral researcher in organic chemistry.”



Dr. Kirsi Salorinne: “I was born and raised in Finland. I have also been travelling since I was an undergraduate. I spent one year in the US, and then Germany and Canada for some collaborations in my research. Here, I work as a postdoctoral researcher at ITbM. I work on materials chemistry.”



Dr. Amine Bouibes: “I was born in Morocco. I moved to France for my undergraduate studies, and continued to study for my PhD in France. I have an expertise in materials design, and now I work at the [Graduate School of Information Science \(from April 2017\)](#), as a postdoctoral researcher.”



Dr. Karim Nissar: “I was born in Bangladesh. My PhD is in microelectronic reliability from the University of Malaya in 2015. Currently, I am a postdoctoral research fellow at the [Graduate School of Engineering](#) in Nagoya University, collaborating with Professor Nakazato’s laboratory. I work on electrical characterization of nanomaterials.”

Coming to Japan

At the beginning of the discussion, some of the participants mentioned the difficulty of coming to Japan because it’s so far away and so different from any other country.



Kirsi: “If you’ve been somewhere else, you’re a little bit braver and you don’t feel it as intimidating to move to a different country. If it is your first time abroad, I think Japan might be a little intimidating, especially if you don’t speak Japanese. You don’t necessarily need to know Japanese to live and work in Japan, but support and help from your Japanese colleagues is essential when dealing with even the smallest everyday problems, such as operating systems / software in Japanese, opening bank account, official email/mail, etc. If you don’t have a local support, life can be very difficult.”

ITbM has support staff that helps overseas researchers and their families to find accommodation, open bank accounts, go to hospitals, help children find schools as well as other support. Also, many of the students and researchers at ITbM are used to communicating with people coming from abroad, so, asking for help is not too difficult.

Although knowing the Japanese language is not essential, many of the researchers have picked up a little Japanese to make their lives easier. Karim says that he knows about 100-200 Japanese words and also uses gestures and drawings to communicate, adding that it works out most of the time.



Kirsi: “To do research, we don’t really need Japanese. But to get through

everyday living, if you know just a little bit Japanese, it gets you very far.”

Many of the participants felt that some Japanese students appeared to hesitate to speak in English, because they were afraid to make mistakes. The researchers point out that it’s okay to make mistakes and mutual understanding is the key for people to come together.



Karim: “For foreigners, learning Japanese is not easy. Therefore, there is always a big communication gap between the foreigners and Japanese people, although I can see a lot of the Japanese students watch English movies and listen to English songs. But still, many of the students hesitate to speak in English. At the same time, I think it’s our duty to step forward to learn Japanese. We can’t make it 100% but at least we can try.”

How did you choose and make your decision to work at Nagoya University, out of the other universities around the world?

—World-leading research groups at Nagoya University



Asraa: “I attended the talk of [Prof. Itami](#), the Director of ITbM, at an international conference when I was a graduate student. I was really impressed with his research, and then asked him to work in his lab through a study exchange program, and so I did! At that time, I already decided where to work in my postdoc career.”



Kirsi: “In my case, I was visiting Prof. Crudden’s group in Canada during my postdoc in Finland. She told me she was an overseas Principal Investigator at ITbM, where she had a satellite group, and asked if I wanted to join her group in Japan. To be honest, I had no idea about Nagoya University or ITbM.”

Many of the people from abroad are unsure of where Nagoya is located in Japan, and Toyota, which is a city near Nagoya, can be a more familiar place being the name of a major car manufacturer in Japan.

About Nagoya

For centuries, Nagoya has been acknowledged as a sustainable society; however, more recently, it has been recognized for its strong manufacturing industries. It is especially well known as the home of the Toyota Motor group. For more details regarding amazing Nagoya, please visit the [Nagoya Convention & Visitors Bureau](#). (Nagoya University established a Cooperative Agreement with the Nagoya Convention & Visitors Bureau in 2014.)



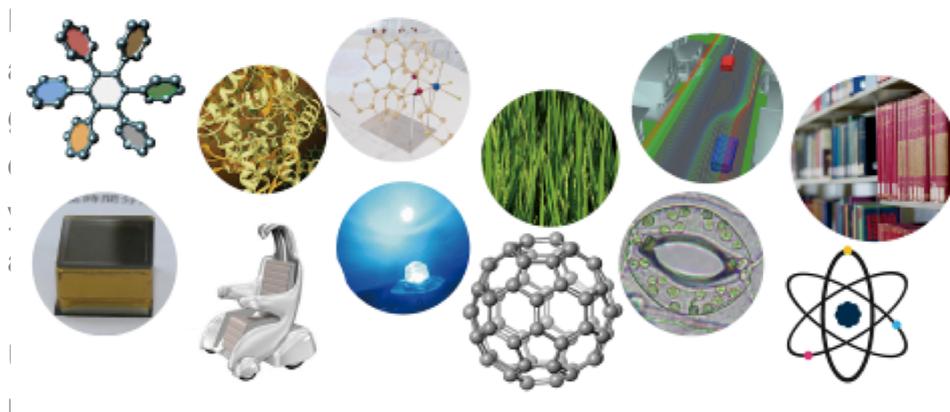
—World's TOP 100 for 6 subjects of Nagoya University



Karim: “When I was looking for a postdoc position, I looked at the QS World University Rankings®. I found Nagoya University at that time was placed at the top 100 universities. I contacted my current supervisor, who had a good number of collaborations and publications. My application went successful by the grace of Almighty. I thought joining Nagoya University would be a very good opportunity and the Professor arranged everything for me.”

“Before joining officially, I came to visit the campus. Everything was calm and peaceful, and my professor was very energetic.”

According to the QS World University Ranking® in 2016,



Nagoya University was ranked in the Top 100 universities for six subjects: Engineering-Chemical; Agriculture & Forestry; Biological Sciences; Chemistry; Materials Science; and Physics & Astronomy.

Karim talked about his dilemma about coming to Japan, but when he saw that the 2014 Nobel Prize in physics was won by three Japanese scientists, with two

Professors Hiroshi Amano and Isamu Akasaki, originating from Nagoya University, this made him highly motivated to come to Nagoya.”



Amine: “I had more or less no idea about Japan, but I came to work here because my professor was at Nagoya University. Actually, I did not know him personally, and had not met him before but I knew him by name. In fact, Prof. Nagaoka is active and famous in our field of research.”

—Nobel laureates from Nagoya University

About the Nobel Laureates from Nagoya University

Since entering the 21st century, 14 Japanese researchers have received a Nobel Prize. Among them, six were graduates of or have been affiliated with Nagoya University as faculty members during their careers.



Arriving in Nagoya or Japan, what did you find through your experiences?

—Lifestyle



Asraa: “Culture-shock is not avoidable staying in Japan. Everything in Japan is so different, like toilets, food, people, subway, to the cleanness.”



Karim: “I used to stay in Malaysia, where I experienced Chinese culture. I thought Japan would be quite similar to that, but it was not. I was impressed by many of the customs in Japan. For example, public transportation is always punctual. This makes me try to be punctual when attending meetings at work: I am always in my spot 5 minutes before the beginning of meetings.”



Kirsi: “Japan is also fascinating if you’re interested in the culture. That’s also one motivation of coming to Japan. I think the work-life balance is important. You need an opportunity to explore this country, because it’s so unique.”



Amine: “One shock is food quantity, as the amount can be really small sometimes. Also, although it depends on the people or laboratories, it is well known that Japanese people tend to work more or longer hours than other countries.”

Japanese labs are often considered to be a place for long working hours. Although this may be true for some labs, this usually depends on the person, lab or subject area that you’re working on.

—Working environment



Karim: “Actually, my lab is not so stringent. The professor does not give us much pressure, but he has built an environment where everyone wants to work and there is a competitive environment in the lab that motivates us to work more.”

“One more important point is Japanese universities allocate a lot of resources for research purposes. The professors who have a lot of funding and grants can buy a lot of equipment and tools. Sometimes it takes time to order goods, but at least I can eventually get them and I’m happy with that.”



Kirsi: “In universities abroad, equipment is usually shared by the department. Here in Japan, it’s important what kind of group you’re working in. If you’re working in a big rich group, you have all the equipment available, but if you’re working in a smaller group that doesn’t have enough money, it can be a little more difficult.”

“Also in Europe, the equipment are usually centralized, and there’s a person responsible for it. There’s always somebody who knows exactly how the equipment works and you can always go to that person, but here in Japan, you often need to learn everything by yourself.”



Asraa: “This may be unique for Japan, but in most cases, the experimental instruments are not owned by the university, but belong to the individual laboratories. Instead of having specialists or technicians for the machines, students in the laboratory are in charge of the equipment.”



Amine: “To own such expensive machines by individual laboratories, I found that the researchers of Nagoya University have obtained big research funding. The problem is that the instruction manuals are written only in Japanese.”

—Language



Kirsi: “For me, it took at least six months to learn very basic Japanese. It’s important that you have some hobbies or something that connects you to the society as well, so you don’t just feel like a tourist passing by, but actually feel like living here and not just go to sleep and work.”



Asraa: “We have a person at ITbM who makes our life easier when we first arrive in Japan, like helping us go to the apartment and accompanying you on your first medical visit. I think this kind of person makes you feel less helpless, because you know whom to ask. This person makes a huge change to your life and life quality changes a lot. It’s really helpful.”

Discussion organized and written by Ayako Umemura and Ayako Miyazaki

Want to share your opinions?

PhD students, postdocs, and young researchers at Nagoya University meet frequently and exchange their opinions. For more information, visit [NUECRA](#).

Interested in studying abroad at Nagoya University?

You may find more on [Nagoya University OpenCourseWare \(NU OCW\)](#). Some of the schools also provide [Global 30 \(G30\) International Program](#).

About ITbM

The Institute of Transformative Bio-Molecules (ITbM) is an international research center established in April 2013 at Nagoya University. The goal of ITbM is to develop bio-functional molecules that change the way we live, i.e. “transformative bio-molecules”, through the dynamic collaboration between chemistry and animal/plant biology. ITbM has many researchers from overseas and is equipped with Mix Labs to promote interdisciplinary research.