

Name of JSPS Fellow: Dr Jack Wells

Name of Host Institution: The National Institute of Radiological Sciences

Name of Host Researcher: Dr Ichio Aoki

Having been awarded a short term fellowship by the JSPS, I spent 6 months working at the National Institute of Radiological Sciences in Chiba, just to the east of Tokyo. It was a truly rewarding and memorable experience. Japan is a wonderful country, and I feel privileged to have lived and worked there for 6 months.

Prior to the placement, I enrolled in an evening class to learn Japanese. Upon arrival, I was very glad to have grasped the basics of the language and this is something I would highly recommend. During my first day at work, I was immediately taken back by the kindness of my new colleagues. Many of them gave up an awful lot of their time to help me settle in (as well as several welcome dinners!). I don't know what I would have done without them to help me with several tasks including: setting up a bank account, finding an apartment and registering with the local council.

During my fellowship I was working with the multi-modal molecular imaging team. We used functional MRI to investigate the neurological origins of Fibromyalgia (a highly prevalent and oppressive chronic pain condition). I worked under the guidance of the head of the department who always found time for advice and discussion (despite being very busy!). I worked closely with two young technicians both of whom showed competence and wisdom beyond their years. Because of my very limited Japanese language skills, communication was sometimes challenging.

Embarrassingly, I often fell into the very English trap of lazily falling into ones own native tongue and expecting others to understand. For this reason I was glad to be working in a relatively familiar field, as I had ~10 years' experience of using MRI as a medical research tool. Given the challenge of communication, I would highly recommend choosing a research project that allies with your previous experience – I think my younger, less experienced, self would have struggled with the dual challenge of communication and an unfamiliar research territory.

Throughout, the level of dedication and passion my new colleagues displayed for their research was inspiring. My work colleagues work very long hours (12 hour day standard) and sometimes keeping up with them in such a new environment was quite exhausting! But the research project was fascinating and my colleagues were very supportive, so it was always enjoyable. However the work ethic in Japan is such that any JSPS fellowship is likely to be quite an intense working experience!

For the first time in my life, I didn't need to rely on busses and tubes, but instead a friend at work lent me a bike and I cycled everywhere. Unlike many countries, most Japanese cities are designed with the cyclist in mind and exploring the local area by bike was a joy. I registered at the local centre for language exchange ("The Chiba International Centre"), and met a volunteer Japanese teacher who turned out to be a great friend (Hiro). We met up every week to chat in Japanese/English and Hiro showed me around all the must see places in the local area. My Japanese really improved during the first few months of the placement thanks to Hiro! I also joined a very friendly football club and we played by the sea every Saturday near Inage Kaigan. I personally really enjoyed being in Chiba as it was a bit quieter and more suburban than central Tokyo, whilst having easy access to the city and the bullet trains from Tokyo station.

In July and September I had some friends visit and I took time off from the lab to explore western Japan (including Kyoto, which was the real highlight). The last couple of months were a bit of a mad rush to complete the research project as best we could, and we did achieve a degree of closure with the project in the end. We are currently composing two manuscripts for publication in biomedical imaging journals, based on the collaborative experiments that we performed.

The week before my return to the UK I was invited to 6 leaving parties that were organised by my new work colleagues and friends that I had met only 6 months ago. When the time came for me to return to the UK, I was sad to be leaving but I hope that my fellowship may be the springboard for a long term collaboration between my current research lab (the UCL Centre for Advanced Biomedical Imaging) and the National Institute of Radiological Sciences (Chiba).

I would highly recommend the experience of performing research in Japan principally because of the kindness, warmth and inspiring work ethic of the people. However, I would try to ensure that the project is very tightly defined and aligns with your previous experience given the challenge of communicating in a new and unfamiliar language.

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