

SP19108
2019 Summer Programme
Fellows Experience Report
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Fellow

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Host

Prof. Fumiko Kohama
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Research Topic

Tokyo 2020 Olympic & Paralympic Games Volunteer programme

My research focussed on the experiences and expectations of the Tokyo 2020 Games Volunteers. It is primarily social research contributing to my comparative study with London 2012 and Rio 2016. Hence it is quite different from that of most other fellows, who are predominantly from the natural sciences, mathematics and other rather technical fields.

Social research presents particular challenges in Japan when one doesn't understand the language or have a background in Japanese Studies. Interestingly language was less of an issue than I expected, as most of the participants in the programme have good English language skills – it is one of the qualifying skills to become a volunteer. More challenging were the cultural aspects, firstly of gaining access to the volunteers (through a series of introductions across the Olympic network), and secondly the face-to-face interactions with volunteers to secure their participation in the study and to conduct semi-structured interviews. My host, Professor Kohama, went to great lengths to help me navigate the Olympic network, by writing extremely formal letters and following up by polite phone calls and reminder emails with numerous gatekeepers and stakeholders, for which I am extremely grateful and without which the study could not have proceeded.

My first month in Japan was taken up with settling into the department, general orientation, background research, elementary language training and – most importantly – networking amongst Olympic stakeholders. My second month was focussed on preparing, conducting and analysing fieldwork at a three-day volunteer orientation and training event. My research involved ethnographic study of the event as a whole, while in the margins I conducted 'flash' interviews with volunteers and more in-depth interviews with event organisers. There was also sufficient time and resources for me to take a week off and travel in the Kansai region which gave me a great insight into Japanese society and culture, and patterns of urbanisation and landscape.

On my return to England I presented preliminary findings of my research at a conference in UCL in November 2019; this focussed on the apparent tensions between the more typically Japanese concept of voluntary work based on duty and mutual assistance and the more Western model of volunteerism rooted in Judeo-Christian charity and individualism. I hope to conduct follow-up research with the same participants post-Games to understand how the relational aspects of the Games were constructed by organisers and experienced by volunteers.

Studying in Japan: some tips

- Workplace relationships tend to be rather formal in Japan, even in academia, so prepare to reciprocate the politeness you will be shown;
- Academics have a heavy workload – including paperwork to process on behalf of Summer Programme fellows – so be conscious that you may not be aware of the lengths your hosts are going to;
- Find a way to contribute to the life of the department you're being hosted in, perhaps by giving a lecture or slideshow, or throwing a party UK-style;

Living in Japan: some tips

- Learn elementary Japanese before departure, e.g. basic phrases, alphabet, Duolingo, etc.
- Bring lots of small gifts from home (e.g. sweets, biscuits) to give to people
- Get 'pocket wifi' rather than relying on a sim card as public WiFi is not very accessible

