The same, only different
Postdoctoral experience in Japan: an alternative worth considering

Postdoctoral funding often comes with mobility as a precondition, so that a lot of new postdoctoral fellows get a ticket abroad with their stipend. For most Europeans, ‘abroad’ means the USA, with its highly competitive scientific environment. Japan offers a significant alternative, allowing one to try to combine science with a sort of tourism, although the country is not renowned for its short, stress-free working days. In addition, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (http://www.jsps.go.jp) offers generous support—current stipends are £270,000 (2535 Euro) tax-free per month, with various allowances. Their application procedure is relatively straightforward. I had a productive and enjoyable time there, so I would like to give some impressions of working as a foreign postdoctoral fellow in Japan and some advice for those who might consider doing scientific research there.

The ‘normal’ laboratory has many students, a few technicians or post-doctoral fellows, a sprinkling of assistant professors and one all-powerful professor. Of these more senior positions, very few are filled by women. This imbalance is evident even at postgraduate and post-doctoral levels, although the government is trying to redress it. Each laboratory has a great deal of autonomy in terms of resources and of ideas—external review is not a particular feature of Japanese research. Since this can translate into isolation, anyone interested in Japanese laboratories should pick the host carefully to ensure that the furrow you plan to plough will not become a rut. The lab I chose was a little unusual by Japanese standards. The chair was partly funded by industry and was only for a limited period, in contrast to the usually tenured chairs. As a consequence, there were only a few students, although the laboratory did have technical support—a rarity due to their wide structural diversity and their excellent adaptation to biologically active structures, Cragg thinks. ‘The chemists at the bench, no matter how good they are, just cannot produce the wonderful chemicals nature has,’ he said.

Lisa Onaga
The author is a freelance journalist in Washington, DC.
E-mail: lisaonaga@zdnetonebox.com
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There remains a strong formal element, even in the relatively relaxed atmosphere of university research

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may be a kind of bogeyman to scare recalcitrant postdocs back to the bench, but with good reason. An average scientific working day is ten to eleven hours, with Saturday being a fairly normal weekday. The extent to which a foreigner is expected to adopt Japanese working hours varies from lab to lab, so that it may be worth consulting previous lab members when deciding.

External seminars are a good indication of how well-connected a laboratory is with the rest of the scientific world. Impromptu seminars by visiting foreign speakers were rather rare, but I was fortunate in Kyoto in having access to surprisingly frequent symposia featuring well-established researchers. Japanese labs are very willing to enter into collaborations; for practical reasons, these are usually within Japan. Even with this large amount of internal contact and collaboration, I was struck by the extent to which Japanese scientists were familiar with one another’s work, regardless of where this work was being done. This may reflect to some extent the politics of Japanese research funding and the competition for tenured positions, but these are deep waters from which I stayed well away.

During interviews, I was struck by the enthusiasm of potential Japanese host labs for having a European come and work. I visited a number of labs before making a choice and they were all very encouraging and receptive. Being an English speaker was an advantage, as proof-reading skills are often in demand. I would urge anyone considering applying to a Japanese laboratory to visit beforehand. Working practices and conditions vary enormously between labs, even within the same university, but the funding advantages enjoyed by the top five or so universities (ask a Japanese colleague for this list) and the National Institutes make them the places that are most likely to be attractive for a foreign researcher. A lab visit, seminar and the accompanying discussions will give a far better picture of a potential host laboratory than any tabulation of papers. Furthermore, only a visit to the country can let anyone decide whether he or she would like to spend two or more years living there. However, I met no foreign scientist who holds any sort of long-term position at a Japanese university. That level of internationalisation will take a while and, perhaps, a different sort of research institution.

Ciaran Morrison

The author is at the Institute of Cell and Molecular Biology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK and was a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science postdoctoral fellow from 1997 to 1999 with Professor S. Takeda of the Bayer-Chair Department of Molecular Immunology and Allergology in Kyoto University’s Medical Faculty.

E-mail: Ciaran.Morrison@ed.ac.uk
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