

# **PATHWAY TO DOCTORAL DEGREE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE LAND OF RISING SUN**

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Dean of the Faculty, Professors, Heads of Departments, Coordinators and my dear colleagues of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC), wishing Good Morning to all of you, I would like to thank you all for giving me this opportunity to share my research experiences with you.

At the same time, I am obliged to convey my sincere thanks to Dr Ajward and Dr Dayarathna for inviting me to deliver the keynote address at the Faculty Symposium - Semester I (2016), and I feel that I am greatly privileged and honored to be here, in presence of you all, the erudite scholars and intellectuals.

First, I would like to remind many senior academics of the Faculty at this special moment with much gratitude for their greater inspiration, valuable guidance and advices for the successful completion of my studies in Japan under the Monbukagakusho (MEXT) scholarship offered by the Japanese Government. Dear Sirs, since the day I heard that good news and was preparing for the preliminary studies in Japan, you were behind me. My dear sirs, you are pillars of my success.

Dear fellow academics, at this special moment, with my experiences of foreign exposure; having participated at International conferences and stayed long in a foreign land pursuing higher studies, I personally believe that I have a lot to share with you while drawing your attention on some of the salient topics with my humble reflections.

## ***Scholarships and Funding***

When I draw your attention on my scholarships and funding, I should note that, before I was selected for the MEXT scholarship, I applied for several other doctoral scholarship programs - through direct application to foreign universities and some other scholarships as well through the Government of Sri Lanka. I understood that our ability to frame a comprehensive proposal and the capacity to defend its contents are the important traits that we should pay our attention on. I learned much from each interview I faced, to make my proposal viable in the eyes of a multi-disciplinary interview panel. I consider it as a critical aspect for successful selection. Though direct applications to universities might provide better success rates, the most common scholarships under this approach are the tuition waivers. Scholarships which provide monthly stipends in addition to tuition

waivers are mostly awarded based on academic performance during the study period of the applicant. When the period applied is in focus, it is heartening to note that more opportunities for financial assistance are being granted locally for those who have secured study placements abroad.

### ***Where I Was***

I was initially assigned to Tottori University in Tottori prefecture, western Japan for an intensive course on Japanese language. On its successful completion, I moved to Shimane University, Shimane prefecture for the study program. My city – Matsue is over 600k.m. from the capital Tokyo, though located on the same island. I researched before I arrived in Japan on the Internet about the climate in Matsue. Having lived in a tropical climate all my life, I had to face the challenges caused by the unfriendly weather conditions especially in winter. However, when I reflect on life in Japan, the opportunity to live in a country where the change of the four seasons was intertwined with local culture and enthusiastically celebrated, provided me with many pleasant memories. It was far from the hardships that I originally imagined.

### ***Embedded with Japanese Culture***

Throughout my studies in Japan, almost all academic activities including conversations with supervisors were carried out in English. Yet, living in a country where the use of English was not widespread as in Sri Lanka introduced a number of challenges. While learning of the local language assisted me in carrying out day to day affairs, during the initial stages of the learning curve, one would require translation assistance that I must stress. This is where you would need a support network. In My University, there were a few Sri Lankan students, but my support network was not limited to them. I developed an active network with other foreign students, and the foreigners living in the same city as well. I must also confess that when you live as a family unit, at times this supportive network itself was not sufficient in my view. I attempted to familiarize myself with the Japanese culture and local customs. This enabled me to build up strong friendships among locals which I now consider as a lifetime experience of living values.

### ***From Research Proposal to Doctoral Proposal***

The proposal I prepared for the local selection of the MEXT Scholarship was well fathomed and pitched to ensure that it had a high probability of receiving a positive response. Prior to entering the doctoral study program, I rewrote my proposal with the advice of my supervisor by modifying the context. I was open to the idea of re-writing the original proposal appropriately and sensed that it further refined my proposal. I also have witnessed others who have staunchly held to their original proposal. However, in my opinion, it is very necessary to build up a healthy relationship with your supervisor at all times. That is to count on their background and seek advice. My doctoral research was in the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), which deals with interaction technologies and techniques involved at the boundary between computers and users. Specifically, it dealt with an examination in to the ways how human foot gestures can be

used as an effective interaction methodology. During the course of my research work, I developed hardware and software for this purpose. A series of studies were also developed and carried out to evaluate user feedback appropriately.

### ***Important Traits to be Developed***

In a country where high-speed trains run with only an average delay in the order of seconds, punctuality in every aspect of work is essential criteria. As a country, Japan is time conscious and it is reflected in all sectors of their society. Japanese society at large practise zero tolerance in their work and business ethics. Even when there is heavy rain, it is natural to see people moving around in raincoats riding bicycles, a common occurrence. This aspect has been extended to almost all University activities as a routine. As a personality from Sri Lanka, a country where delays and excuses are the followed patterns, it was challenging at first to get accustomed. Reflecting on this, internalizing the ability to work and comply with deadlines without any excuses was a practice that I acquired during the early stages of my research. I strongly believe that this is one of the challenges we have to overcome as a country, as a university and importantly as a faculty when we have identified ourselves as the “Centre of Excellence”. In expanding this Japanese concept further, the ability to claim responsibility and apologize when and where necessary is a strongly practiced virtue all over Japan. These positive attitudes and gestures had developed Japanese society healthily and Japan as a strong nation itself, and they are very proud of their contributions to the world.

May I use this opportunity to draw the attention of this learned audience to another aspect and comment on it so that I cultivate and propagate a novel idea among you? In Shimane University, I could notice majority of the senior academics and other university administrators certainly possess disposable income to afford vehicles for daily routine. However, I witnessed rather than driving a car, they use bicycles for short distance travelling simply as a healthy and eco-friendly option. It is the same even with the use of elevators, air-conditioners, heaters, etc.

The progress of the research was evaluated weekly by face to face meetings with my supervisor and research groups. However, general communications via electronic mail were more frequent. In email communications, the response time is an exemplary reflection of responsibility. Short replies within few hours and detailed replies within a day were a practice adopted and expected to adhere by all. Even today I follow the same practice. It is sad to say that, in these aspects, in my opinion as a country, we are lagging behind. However, we should be happy as academia that on an individual basis there are many among us who are an exception to this erroneous practices. Yet another noteworthy trait was that after each meeting, the next meeting date was immediately decided upon, and most of the participants would enter it to their diary or electronic organizer to follow.

### ***Networking with Like-minded Researchers***

While publishing research in peer-reviewed journals of repute is the gold standard, presenting at international conferences provided an opportunity not only to present my work and fine tune contents, but also to link up with like-minded researchers present around the world. This linking up was very useful in sharing professional experiences and discuss future collaborations. In a networked world as ours today, keeping in touch is a simple task. Not only social networks such as Facebook, but also professional networks such as LinkedIn or even sites like ResearchGate and Academia assist in this aspect. The latter websites are also immensely useful in enabling your research to reach a larger audience, beyond the conference proceedings or journal subscribers.

### ***Life Beyond Research***

As a bachelor during the initial stages of my study in Japan, most of my days and nights were spent in my research lab. These research labs, which are basically office spaces, had everything necessary to support a prolonged stay, even overnight. After my wife joined me in Japan and we had a daughter, balancing time for research and family were challenging at times. When we had free time as a family on the weekends, traveling and enjoying the scenic beauty of Japan was a pastime we enjoyed immensely. These travels took us to meet other Sri Lankans living in different parts of Japan, who included all of my colleagues of the FMSC who were in Japan during the same time. We too enjoyed hosting our friends occasionally.

Volunteering activities in Matsue city brought us closer to the local community and provided me a deeper understanding of Japan. I was involved with the local police in their community services as well as cyber monitoring. As Japan usually faces many natural disasters, disaster preparation was an integral aspect of life in Japan. I am happy to state that I had the privilege to serve as a disaster preparation foreign volunteer. Sharing information about Sri Lanka and our culture with Japanese schools and other forums made me proud of my motherland and its history. They too appreciated it. In social get-togethers, we arranged local Japanese to taste Sri Lankan culinary, and their bondage became closer to us.

Finally, I would like to highlight that, for the aspiring academia of our faculty who are looking forward for placements abroad and returning to Sri Lanka, Japan is an excellent choice. Though the cost of living is high compared to Sri Lanka, scholarship funding may help to reduce the financial burden. The opportunity to study in a relatively safe country, very friendly, accommodating society and a leading economic, technological superpower may provide immense benefits for those who are willing to learn a new language and culture. Of course, there may be other countries which may have similar good research and study opportunities.

So, in conclusion, my concluding message is that, you should definitely travel out and experience the world wherever it maybe, stay healthily focused until you attain your desired goals. Most importantly return to Sri Lanka not only as a qualified academic with

updated experiences and knowledge, but also with the assimilation of living values. I kindly invite you to share your achievements with your colleagues and student population in order to raise the life standard Sri Lankan society in a broader horizon.

I pay my humble gratitude to all of you for your presence and being attentive to me.