A Gaijin’s View Point: Discussion on Selected Characteristics of the Japanese Academic System

Introduction
When I arrived to Japan back in March 2005, this country was—despite extensive international experiences through working, backpacking and studying in Europe, Asia and the Americas—completely unknown soil to me. I came with the goal to immerse myself, in research of course, but also in this country’s culture, language and customs. Therefore, in this article I would like to look at differences that caught my attention between the Japanese academic system, and that of other parts of the world I am familiar with. Additionally, I would like to point out why I think that international environments in research laboratories are both beneficial and important for quality research results.

Selection by Examination
Selection exams are necessarily part of any academic curriculum, and not a single student will manage to get around them. Yet, approaches to selection differ widely across academic systems. In Japan, the main selection characteristically takes place when entering university. The university’s name is nearly more important than the career studied, and guarantees occasionally first class access to a professional career. What a student majored in is of less importance, as most Japanese companies expect to retrain them anyway. A degree in Japanese history will therefore only be a minor obstacle for becoming a software engineer.

In contrast, and more commonly represented outside Japan, is the approach that selection has not finished with passing entrance examinations to a prestigious university, but that unless you work hard for good grades during your studies, and engage additional in relevant extra-curricular activities such as AIESEC or IAESTE and proved your fitness for business through internships (optimally in international setting), getting a lucrative as well as interesting job is while not out of reach, considerably harder to achieve. Needless to say that the study period be better not prolonged through all the obligations.
not directly related to the university career. In brief: Companies in Europe and the US are looking for graduates that they can optimally use in business context without any further training.

Valuation of non-academic jobs

A key difference between Japan and other countries is the timing of job hunting. In Japan, students traditionally start to actively hunt for after-graduation job placements roughly a year before graduation. When they enter their second master degree year — precisely the timing when they are sufficiently familiar and competent to produce relevant results — much of their energy gets absorbed, instead of research, in attending company presentations, company exam sessions, preparing and sending out application portfolios; and later in attending introductory sessions at their future employer. Sadly, this pressure on early job hunting has forced more than one student I know to skim over academic obligations and just comply with them to the extent guaranteeing graduation.

In contrast, at least in Europe and likely also the US, pressure on students to deliver academic results is heavy until the last moment. A student will not be guaranteed graduation until he or she has actually turned in and completed all assignments successfully. Systematic job hunt tends therefore not to take place until about three months prior to graduation: when exams are over, the grades known, the results of the thesis research mostly written down, and no surprises are likely to occur anymore. Critical cases, i.e., those students who may not know until the very end if or if not they will be able to graduate, may have to wait until even after graduation: no company would want to contract them without proven achievements.

Relationship Professor/Student

In Switzerland, as well as Germany for instance, we see our professors and supervisors as our bosses, roughly in the same way we would see our superiors outside the academic world. As a consequence, the relationship is coined by professional requirements and needs. Students are expected — in principle — to come and see their supervisor if they are in doubt or have to get something sorted out. PhD students are not considered "students" as the word suggests in English, but self-responsible, while badly paid, researchers, expected do get their work done independently. It is their responsibility also to schedule regular coordination meetings with their supervisors, in the same way team meetings take place in a non-academic environment, too. People aspiring to a doctorate are normally loaded with many other obligations than "just" research. They — compulsorily — supervise exercise sessions of multiple lectures, correct the handed in exercises, design the exams (the professor usually just takes care of the final adjustments), produce the sample solutions, correct and grade exams (the professor again just takes care of difficult cases), supervise bachelor and master theses — and of course, still deal with their own research and the related issues such as publications. All this for normally continues for at least 5 years — the time considered the bare minimum for producing quality results in many countries throughout Central Europe, the U.S. or South America. As a natural "next" step, a post doctoral researcher is expected to be able to lead his or her own research group, and only rely on his professor in severe cases.

In Japan, likely Asia in general, the approach is fundamentally different. The relationship between professors and students is ideally more akin to that of a foster parent with foster children. The professor is in charge to check that the student advances sufficiently in his work, and make him or her speed up if achievements are not sufficient. In exchange, there is little team-like discussion where opinions and approaches of students and professors alike are being discussed. In principle, the professor has the responsibility to decide for the best of everybody involved.

South European, Latin American countries as well as most of the Anglo-Saxon countries tend to be somewhere in the middle: The students have less extra-research obligations, but as for research they are principally accountable for their success. The difference, painted black and white, can be summarized as follows: In Asia, including Japan, the professor has failed if the student does not achieve his or her goals. In Europe and the Americas it is the student who must ensure his or her success, although to succeed agreement with the supervisor has to be sought.

Tenure system

Japan's tenure system for academic talents is unique in that it is neither based on selectivity exams (such as is the case in Spain, France, Italy) on a national level, nor that selection takes place through a "normal" evaluation process such as is the case in the US, Switzerland, Germany or the UK. Academic talents tend to remain if possible at their Alma Mater, under protection of a mentoring senior professor. As time goes by, they more or less automatically move up the ranks. The critical issue for any talent is to find a mentor willing to take him or her under her wing.

Those academic talents, that fail
to get protection from a seasoned professor, among them many Japanese women scientists but also foreign academics, have as a consequence a difficult time finding a place in this system, or even being considered anything else than short term guests. As most talents remain in the end at their original Alma Mater if somehow possible, and mobility is scarce even on a national level, Japanese universities are only little attractive to many of those talents which in due course often leave the academic world to try their luck otherwise.

Why have foreigners join a lab?
Aside from the cultural exchange that will invariable happen and make people aware of the fact that one is always a “Gaijin” (i.e. an outside person) anywhere on this planet with exception of ones home country, I believe there are numerous reasons to welcome foreign academics mid

to long-term to the core of Japanese research labs:
My favorite amongst those is all about discussion culture for opinion interchange—something which leads in my eyes to genuine and productive results: As soon as a foreigner arrives — not only to Japan, but imagine say a Japanese going for a PhD to Switzerland — you cannot assume the person to know all implicit rules and habits. Explanations are needed and give the chance to question assumptions, preconditions and standard procedures. Furthermore, varying, occasionally very different research backgrounds can add new viewpoints and vary the angle under which light existing results have been looked at.

These things do not come for free though: consensus has to actively be sought for, instead of surging from quiet implicit agreement. A team-oriented ambiance, with clear goals, based on collaboration, opinion interchange and constructive criticism is indispensable. Fights are allowed — as long as they are fruitful and lead in a constructive way where hierarchies are only the last means to settle decisions and conflicts.

Brief Conclusion
Cultures are coined by the human beings that live in them — this is true, both for research as much as for music or literature. In this column, I have tried to convey without judging some of the differences I have come to notice between Japan and in particular European countries. Importantly however, the gist so far of what I have learned is, I believe, globally valid: Goals get accomplished only through individuals’ motivation and perseverance, and neither culture nor the color of a passport has any influence on the quality of results as long as mutual respect prevails.