Towards a New Phase of International Academic Exchange in Engineering Education and Research

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The number of foreign students studying in Japan reached 110 thousand in 2005, surpassing the target set in 1980 by the Japanese Government's program which called for 100 thousand foreign students in 2005. The first phase of the international academic exchange is now moving into a new phase, where the focus has been shifted from encouraging Japanese students to study abroad, improving conditions for qualified foreign students and organizing new programs to support international academic exchanges.

In Kyoto University, the total number of foreign students is 1244 as recorded in May 2005, of which 60 percent are from China, Korea and Taiwan. The number of foreign students studying abroad is only about 300. In contrast to national statistics, almost 60 percent of all foreign students at Kyoto University are enrolled in graduate programs, and about 7 percent of the students are non-degree students. As a result of the International Doctoral Program, the level of scholarship recipients is as high as 57 percent in the Graduate School of Engineering.

The Graduate School of Engineering has been offering the International Doctoral Program in Engineering since 2003 to provide young foreign students and researchers possessing a master degree with an opportunity to further their studies towards a doctoral degree. In this program, Japanese language ability is not a requirement for the completion of the degree, however a good command of English is necessary. Twenty-one students were enrolled in the first year, and many of whom went on to play an active role in their chosen field after the acquisition of their doctorates.

The number of foreign researchers who held the position of invited professor or had some other formal status in Kyoto University was 286 in 2004, but this number does not include academics who visited for shorter periods. The professors and accompanied students who visit Kyoto University under the auspices of the Memorandum of International Academic Exchange are not always registered in the formal statistics. If we consider the Japanese students who are involved in the international internship program for longer periods and who visit foreign countries as interns and the like, it is clear that the total number of international academic exchange activities are not accurately reflected by the official records.

Under these situations, a new phase of international academic exchange activities has been launched by the Graduate School of Engineering. Examples of these new activities include the Core Environmental Science Program on Environment Science collaboratively with the Malaysian University Group (SEPSCI, since 2003), and urban environments-related academic exchange with the Ministry of Education, China (SEPSCI, since 2001). These activities are given in order to expand the exchange of graduate students in addition to the conventional exchange of researchers.
Orientation trip to Awajishima

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On April 23rd the university organized an orientation trip to Awajishima Island for the new international students who had applied to take part. As you'd expect of an international setting, the atmosphere in the bus was lively and filled with many different languages as the conversation went up a storm. Some of us were in Japan for only a couple of weeks and thus still enthusiastic about almost everything we saw around us. I wondered how Kyoto looked on everyone's eyes. For me, Kyoto city, tinged with the remnants of cherry blossoms, looked spectacular from the bus window. I suppose just as it had always been throughout its long history.

We arrived at the Akashishi Bridge just after noon. Despite being hailed by the bridge several times before, I was still amazed by the sight of that monumental structure stretching the whole length of the strait as if in defiance of the gods of wind and sea. The Bridge is certainly a testimony of technology at work, or rather, technology on display! I often marvel at the tremendous power of technology in transforming nature whenever I see such magnificent works of technology.

After a while, the ferry arrived and we were off to Awajishima. I was struck by the natural beauty of Awajishima isolated yet not lonely. The view contrasted my earlier perception of it. Initially, I had the impression that it was a small, uninhabited island. But as we drove along the tree-lined narrow road toward our final destination of Awaji Landscape Planning and Horticultural College, I was surprised to learn that Awajishima is a vast island with thriving port towns and an interior dotted with farms and homesteads. The college, the only public college in Japan, is set on a gentle sloping landscape surrounded by rich nature. It has gorgeous flower gardens that are architecturally designed to be in harmony with nature and I, suppose, man, creating a serene and beautiful environment. There are Japanese gardens too, through which several small streams flow adding peace to the prevailing beauty. Surely it's an ideal place to relax and enjoy natural peace away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

After lunch and a stroll through the expansive gardens, we gathered for the main business of the day. Preceded by an interesting short lecture on the history of Akashi Bridge, we received important tips on how to get along in this wonderful but often intriguing country that is Japan. Based on two topics such as how to join health insurance, rent an apartment, etc. Finally, we had a guided tour around the gardens and already it was time to commence the journey back.