
SPECIAL REPORT

UKM-NIIGATA University Medical Undergraduate Exchange Program 2012

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It all started with a SSM research. SSM, which is an abbreviation for 'Special Study Module' is a unique module in the curriculum of the Medical Faculty National University of Malaysia (UKM), where each students were required to do a medical research in the field that we have interest in. Being interested in the field of public health, 3 of my friends and I did a research on the prevalence of tuberculosis in Cheras using the graphic informational system (GIS) to map each case of tuberculosis on the map of Kuala Lumpur. Our supervisor was Associate Professor Dr Shamsul Azhar, who is himself an expert on the field of GIS study and has been doing his PhD research using the same system in Niigata University, Japan for almost 4 years. During one of our SSM meetings, he mentions that the post-graduate students in UKM has done several visits to Niigata University and brought up the idea that maybe the undergraduate students like us could do the same.

We thought that we could work it out, and he contacted the doctors at Niigata University. They were in fact more than happy to accept us and in return, they would like to send the undergraduate students from Niigata to UKM in exchange. It was great news and that is how this undergraduate student exchange program between UKM and Niigata University started. We departed to Japan a few months later. On our arrival to the medical faculty, we were greeted by Professor Reiko Saito and Associate Professor Yugo Shobugawa. This exchange program was organized under the

International Health Department. We started the program with a short tour around the International Health department followed by slide presentations by PhD students from the International Health Department of Niigata University. We listened to their presentations and were interested to know that some of the researches done by the PhD students also use the same Graphic Informational System (GIS) that we use. Afterwards, we presented our SSM research titled 'Tuberculosis Clustering and its Associated Factors in Cheras, KL'. They found it very interesting firstly because tuberculosis is quite rare in Japan and secondly because not many undergraduate students know how to use GIS. We told them that it is all thanks to our supervisor, Associate Professor Dr Shamsul who gave us a lot of guidance throughout the research.

Afterwards, we joined a Paediatrics ward round headed by a Paediatrics Professor of Niigata University, Professor Akihiko Saito. During the ward rounds, the medical students presented each of the cases and discussed them in Japanese. However, Professor Akihiko Saito helped translate everything into English. We were interested to know that in Japan, Kawasaki's disease is quite common while in Malaysia the disease is quite rare. It was a good exchange of knowledge, where previously we explained about tuberculosis to them, because it is rare in Japan, and now they explained about Kawasaki's disease to us in exchange, since it is rare in Malaysia.



Figure 1 Taking group photo after ward rounds with Professor Akihiko Saito and the final year medical students of Niigata University

One of the nights, the Japanese students took us out for dinner at a nearby Indian restaurant near. These were the students that will be coming to UKM later for our exchange program. The dinner was mostly filled with language exchanges, where we ask what certain words are in Japanese,

and they ask us what certain words are in Malay. We also learned a lot about each other's culture and exchanged a lot of ideas about this exchange program we are doing.



Figure 2 Having an Indian cuisine dinner with the Niigata University exchange students

The next day, we had the chance to join the pre-clinical students in their tutorials. They used a unique method for discussion, called the KJ method, named after the initials of a prominent Japanese person who created that method. The method makes the discussions much more alive and interesting, where every student has to be active, play their part, and think together to come out to a

group conclusion. I think it is the essence of group-thinking, something the Japanese were well known to have in their culture. Afterwards, we also had the chance to join their lectures. The lectures were in Japanese but there are always those who would help translate for us. They talked about the national medical education, and they asked us about how was the national medical education in Malaysia.



Figure 3 Being introduced to the KJ method of learning from the preclinical students of Niigata University



Figure 4 Taking a photo with the typical Japanese pose after joining their lecture

As the amazing experiences were happening, we did not realize the time had passed by so fast. We had a heavy heart on our last day in Niigata. We could not believe we would be leaving soon. For us, our time here was too short when

there is so much more to experience. However, we do feel that the experience we had, although little was extremely valuable and memorable.



Figure 5 Handing over a token of appreciation to the Head of Department of International Health, Professor Reiko Saito

Before we went back, Professor Yugo was kind enough to bring us to a park next to the Big Swan Stadium that was once the host for World Cup matches when it was held in Japan in 2002. We had sushi in the park, and it was a very tranquil

experience. It was nice experience for a lasting last impression of Niigata. Perhaps one day we will come again to Niigata as medical doctors. Until then, sayonara!