



MEXT SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION

Impact Assessment of COVID-19 on Graduation Plans of MEXT Scholars and plea for special consideration

Prepared by MEXT Scholars Association for
the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEXT)

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding lockdown measures have severely affected the research progress and graduation plans of international students funded through the Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship Program. The MEXT Scholars Association (MSA) conducted a survey among its members to evaluate the situation, which received a total of 53 responses.

Overall, many students enrolled in master's or doctoral programs rely on either specialized equipment that could not be accessed or fieldwork in other countries that could not be completed. It is likely that some of these students will need to extend their period of study to successfully graduate. While the MEXT Scholarship is typically not extended, MSA asks that the MEXT consider the possibility of case-by-case extensions.

MSA would also highlight that the results of the survey suggest that the current communication chain for scholarship related material – namely, that hosting universities are responsible for conveying information from MEXT to scholars – is not functioning as expected. Above the request for case-by-case extensions, MSA also requests a review of the current communication chain.

Introduction

Many international students funded through the Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship Program—hereafter, “MEXT Scholars”—have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding lockdown measures. This has resulted in severe difficulties in completing their research as they could not access required facilities or equipment, nor conduct field studies and data collection.

It is expected that many MEXT Scholars will not be able to complete their research and qualify for graduation within their stipulated standard period of study¹. As a result, they will either risk a longer period of degree candidacy with no financial support from the MEXT Scholarship or have to terminate their degree candidacy.

The MEXT Scholars Association (MSA) became especially concerned when it was made known that a number of students had not received crucial information regarding the discretionary option to take a Leave of Absence (LOA) and suspend the scholarship amidst the pandemic. While MEXT informed universities of this new policy, it appears that a majority of universities did not effectively communicate the policy to

¹ The Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship Program funds two years of study in a master's program and three years of study in a doctoral program.



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MEXT Scholars. For current students, particularly those whose research relies heavily on specialized equipment or fieldwork, the missed opportunity to apply for an LOA is truly unfortunate.

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on the graduation plans of MEXT Scholars, MSA conducted a survey among its members.

Survey Data Collection

The survey was administered online via Google Forms between 15 September 2020 to 05 October 2020, and gathered responses from 53 individuals. A full text of the survey questions and options can be found in Annex A.

The call for respondents was primarily publicized through MSA's Facebook page and MSA's periodic newsletters throughout the data collection period. Participation was not mandatory, and therefore respondents were self-selected, i.e. respondents tended to be MEXT Scholars whose research progress or graduation were affected by COVID-19 and any corresponding measures.

Results and Findings

While the number of responses represent only a small portion of MSA's membership, a significant number of MEXT Scholars responded indicating that they have been under distress.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The largest groups of respondents to the survey belonged to the Social Sciences (28.3%), Natural Sciences (26.4%), Engineering (18.9%) and the Fine Arts (13.2%), which was understandable given that these four fields of study required either fieldwork for data collection, or specialized equipment and facilities to conduct research work.

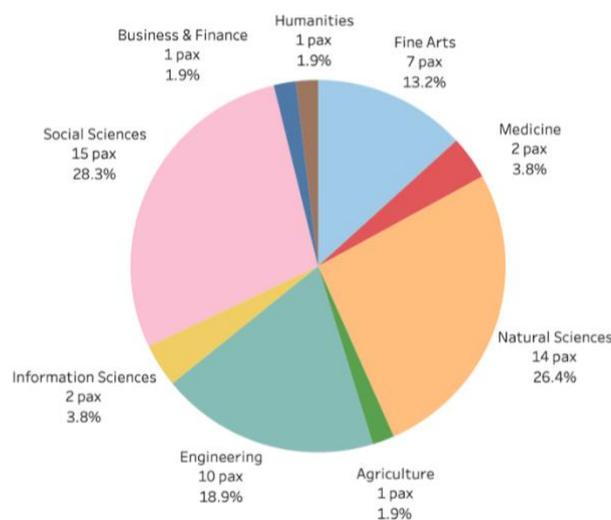


Figure 1: Respondents' fields of study

Correspondingly, when respondents were asked for the primary reason their research was being impeded, around half of the respondents indicated that they were barred from laboratory or art studios, while a third noted that field studies for data collection became impossible due to travel bans and social distancing



measures. A small number of respondents also noted that travel bans affected presentations at overseas conferences, which is a criterion for obtaining their doctoral degrees. Some of these issues proved to be particularly disastrous to certain MEXT Scholars as their research plans became unfeasible, and they had to discard previously completed work and restart from scratch.

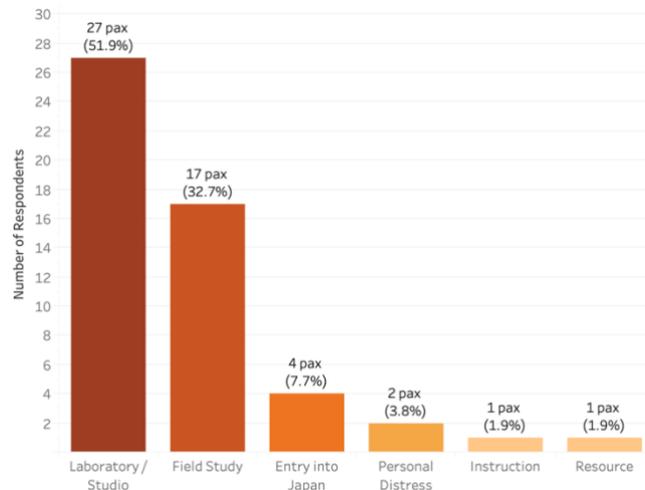


Figure 2: Primary obstacles to graduation or research progress

Inconsistency of Universities' Information Dissemination

It was also noted that a significant number of 37 scholars (around 70% of respondents) had not received any information from their respective universities² regarding the discretionary option to take a Leave of Absence (LOA) and suspend the scholarship amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, learning the information only upon the survey and/or notification from MSA.

We believe the relatively large number of respondents who were unaware demonstrates how there may be gaps in information dissemination to MEXT Scholars, particularly in situations with long chains of dissemination (e.g., MEXT → University Departments → MEXT Scholar).

² The results also show differing results even within universities. This phenomenon of information being delivered to only some departments within some universities has been previously recorded. For example, in 2016 when MEXT called for volunteers to start what was then MSEP, information for this open call was received by scholars in the Law and Economics Faculties but not by scholars in the Faculty of Letters nor in the College of Arts and Sciences.



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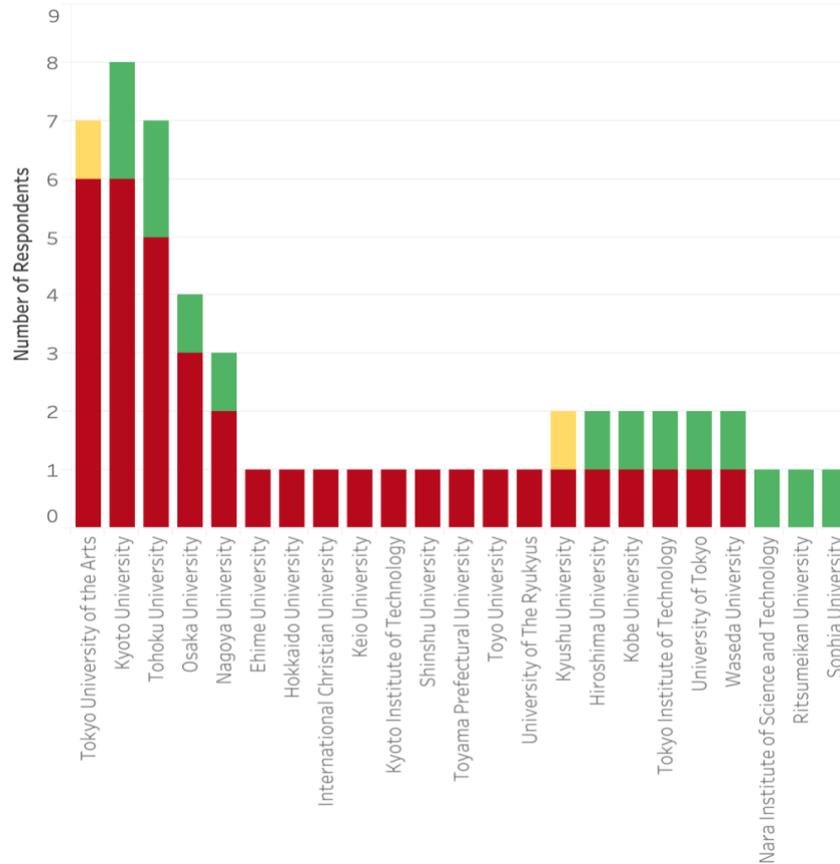


Figure 3: Respondents' Universities and whether they were informed about the option to take LOA and suspend scholarship

In addition, MSA did a simple survey of scholars who arrived between 2015 and 2019 asking whether participants received an invitation to the MEXT / JASSO Scholar Welcoming Event (国費外国人留学生歓迎会) held in the summer in Kobe and in the Autumn in Odaiba, Tokyo. As can be seen in figure 4, while the majority did receive the invite, slightly more than a third did not receive the invitation to participate in the welcoming event from their hosting institutions. This further reinforces our opinion that the current system of dissemination of information may be leaving some scholars out.

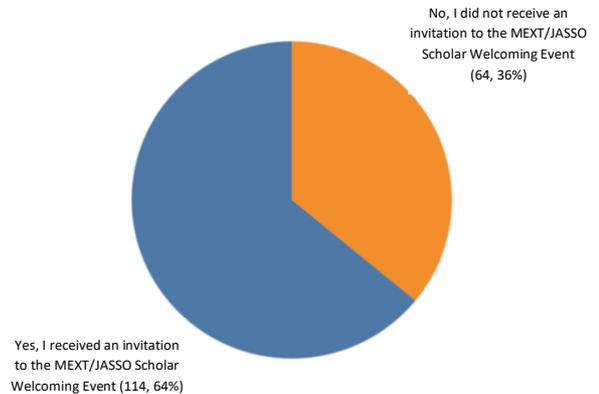


Figure 4: Respondents on whether they had received an invitation to join the MEXT Scholar welcoming party / parties held by MEXT/JASSO (Scholars arriving 2015-2019 inclusive)

Lack of Necessary Support

When asked if their respective universities provided helpful support to resolve their problems, respondents provided mixed answers.

Positive feedback and acknowledgements regarding Universities' support included the following:

- Seminar meetings and classes shifted online
- Wi-Fi access offered to those requiring it



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- Lab access prioritized for graduating students
- Students given remote access to Bloomberg data resource
- Universities did the best they could given the situation

Negative feedback and complaints regarding Universities' support included the following:

- Core issue of scholars forced to exceed the standard study period left unresolved
- Lab rosters severely limited lab-time, barely enough for research
- Financial assistance offered to students did not apply to MEXT Scholars
- Universities' administration department seemed uncertain of information themselves
- No support was provided at all

Recommendations

Improved Information Dissemination

In response to the scattered and inconsistent dissemination of information from MEXT to MEXT Scholars via universities, MSA would like to request MEXT's consideration and action in stipulating for universities to improve their efforts at relaying information to MEXT Scholars, and/or to make such information more accessible.

Case-by-case Extension of Scholarship

Given the extraordinary circumstances, MSA asks that MEXT consider establishing a process by which impacted students—particularly late-stage doctoral students—could apply for an extension of the scholarship beyond the standard period. This would be incredibly valuable in cases where a given university's oversight or neglect resulted in a MEXT Scholar being unaware of the option to take a Leave of Absence (LOA), and/or where research progress was severely hindered by the pandemic and associated lockdown measure.

Adjustment of Graduation Requirements

Given the global situation in the current COVID-19 pandemic, specific graduation requirements stipulated at certain universities have become untenable and unfeasible. In particular, the requirement for conference publication quotas has become very much more difficult to clear given the cancellation of conference events. As such, more appropriate criteria should be instituted in place of conference publications.

Conclusion

Many MEXT Scholars, who would have otherwise graduated on time and began contributing to the Japanese economy and international relations, are currently facing the risk of not being able to complete their research and attain their degrees.

It is understandable that MEXT cannot accede to every discretionary request given budgetary limitations. However, MSA believes it is to the benefit of MEXT and the interests of the country of Japan, that the time and resources devoted to international students and their research over the past 2–3 years not be allowed



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to go to waste. The support put towards helping current MEXT Scholars overcome the setback caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will surely be a good investment towards Japan's future.



Appendix A – Survey Text

| Question | Options |
|--|--|
| Nationality | |
| Age | |
| Gender | |
| What country are you currently in? | |
| University | |
| Grade: | |
| Field of Study (Arts/Medical/Social Science/Engineering/etc.) | |
| Does your research require highly specialised equipment e.g. medical labs, science labs, engineering equipment, agricultural equipment, wood/metal/ceramic/printmaking etc. equipment, music studios, video studios, digital imaging / x-ray / conservation equipment? | <p>Yes and I could use it during spring semester</p> <p>Yes but I did not have access to this during spring semester due to the pandemic response / school closure</p> <p>No, my research does not require this</p> <p>Other (explain)</p> |
| Does your research require local, national or international travel / access to public collections? | <p>Yes and I had enough access during spring semester</p> <p>Yes but limits on travel or institutional closures prevented me conducting this research during spring semester</p> <p>No, my research does not require this</p> <p>Other (explain)</p> |
| Why is your Masters/PhD affected by Covid-19? (Please explain in details) | |
| What steps did the University take to support you? Was it helpful? | |
| Did your School inform you that it was possible to take a leave of absence from your studies? (Link to document) | Yes / No |
| If you answered 「Yes」 to the the previous question, did you apply for a leave of absence? | Yes / No |
| Do you think you will need an extension for finishing your Masters/PhD? | Yes / No |
| Do you think your Professor will support your reason for extension? | Yes / No |
| Would you be interested in writing an appeal letter to the Ministry along with other affected students? | <p>Yes / No</p> <p>Comments (if any)</p> |



Appendix B – Other Demographics

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| South Asia | India | 7 pax (13.2%) | South America | Peru | 2 pax (3.8%) | | |
| | Bangladesh | 5 pax (9.4%) | | Brazil | 2 pax (3.8%) | | |
| | Pakistan | 1 pax (1.9%) | | Ecuador | 1 pax (1.9%) | | |
| | Total | 13 pax (24.5%) | | Chile | 1 pax (1.9%) | | |
| Europe | France | 3 pax (5.7%) | Argentina | 1 pax (1.9%) | Total | 7 pax (13.2%) | |
| | UK | 2 pax (3.8%) | Middle East | Israeli | | 2 pax (3.8%) | |
| | Greece | 2 pax (3.8%) | Lebanon | 1 pax (1.9%) | Jordan | 1 pax (1.9%) | |
| | Germany | 2 pax (3.8%) | Total | 4 pax (7.5%) | North America | Canada | 2 pax (3.8%) |
| | Belarus | 1 pax (1.9%) | USA | 1 pax (1.9%) | | Mexico | 1 pax (1.9%) |
| | Total | 10 pax (18.9%) | Total | 4 pax (7.5%) | | Africa | Egypt |
| South-East Asia | Malaysia | 3 pax (5.7%) | Algeria | 1 pax (1.9%) | | | Total |
| | Philippines | 2 pax (3.8%) | Oceania | New Zealand | 1 pax (1.9%) | | Total |
| | Indonesia | 2 pax (3.8%) | | West Asia | Kyrgyzstan | 1 pax (1.9%) | Total |
| | Vietnam | 1 pax (1.9%) | Grand Total | | 53 pax (100.0%) | | |
| | Singapore | 1 pax (1.9%) | | | | | |
| | Thailand | 1 pax (1.9%) | | | | | |
| Total | 10 pax (18.9%) | | | | | | |