

Year of selection: FY 2020

Fellow's name: Soichi Shibuya

Period of overseas visit: 1 April 2020–31 March 2022

Fields of research: Medicine, dentistry and pharmacology/Surgery and Pediatric surgery

Destination: United Kingdom

Receiving institution: University College London

Receiving department: Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health

My research

Based on my surgical background, my research aims to create a tissue graft that can be transplanted to children with congenital diseases. Targeting the development of a novel treatment for esophageal atresia, we are trying to establish a method of repopulating a decellularized pig esophagus with human-derived precursor cells, which may allow us to manufacture autologous human esophageal grafts from xenogeneic animal organs.

Advice on preparing to go abroad

I was already in the UK when selected as a JSPS Overseas Research Fellow, so I didn't have to go through any particular coordination with the university to start my fellowship. Initially, I had Academic Visitor Visa for one-year stay and switched to Tier 5 (government authorized exchange) Visa when my Overseas Research Fellowship started. To apply for this visa, I had to obtain a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) from my host university, the process of which took much more time than I had anticipated. So, I would recommend establishing contact with the university's HR department as early as possible when applying for a visa. From my experience, processes tend to become stagnant unless you chase them up constantly. This happens almost every time not only visa processing. Therefore, it's better not to hesitate to contact them rather than worrying about being disliked. An British friend of mine told me, "You have to keep annoying them."

Advice on problems that may arise when living abroad

In my past experience of living overseas, I have hit a wall when it came to communication. As European cultures have a lot in common, people from those countries are good at communicating each other even though their English is not perfect. However, it's not the case in us. Unless you make a conscious effort to adapt yourself, you will be left behind. I found it important to immerse yourself into the British culture by leaning their lifestyle and history not only language. (What's considered common sense or practice in Japan may be opposite here, and vice versa.) That said, London abounds in diversity, and I fortunately haven't experienced any discrimination or disadvantage as being Asian in daily life. You will also be able meet a lot of Japanese people to be friend.

What is it like living abroad?

Rent in London is very high. An apartment shared by 3 or 4 people will cost you £500-800. A one-room studio flat rents for £1000-1500. As I wanted to focus on studying and writing papers at home, I chose to rent a studio flat. Living outside central London would be cheaper, but transportation and safety tend to be worse, so I wouldn't recommend. If you will move with your family, it's a good idea to get in touch with Japanese people coming a business transfer, as they would have a lot of detailed information to share. With regard to food, cookery from around the world can be had in London, so it's easy to satisfy your personal tastes. A wide variety of foodstuffs are cheaply available at supermarkets and grocery stores, so it's easy to save money if you cook yourself. About the weather, winters are as people say dark and gloomy, but in the spring through the summer days are long and the weather is truly wonderful.

What is good about your receiving a Postdoctoral Fellowship for Research Abroad?

As other fellows say, the fellowship gave me the valuable opportunity to concentrate on my research without having to worry about money. It also impressed the other lab members as I didn't need financial support from the lab. On top of that, being selected for such a highly competitive fellowship greatly boosts my confidence as a researcher.