

# Career Advancement through Multiple JSPS Fellowships

**Voices of Two JSPS Fellows**

*Waiting for your  
applications!*



**JSPS**



## Osaka Metropolitan University Graduate School of Medicine

# Laura Barbieri, PhD

### Career

JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowships for Research in Japan  
2023-2025 Standard Program at Osaka Metropolitan University  
2022-2023 Short-term Program at Osaka Metropolitan University  
2019 Summer Program at University of Tokyo

### —What made you decide to apply for JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowships for Research in Japan, and to participate in multiple fellowship programs?

My journey with JSPS began in 2019 with the Summer Program. My host, Prof. Takeda at the University of Tokyo (UTokyo), was introduced to me by my PhD supervisor. During the program, I met several inspiring researchers, some of which I currently work with. One day, chatting of science and life with a colleague, I learnt about a team in Osaka Metropolitan University (OMU) doing fieldwork and field-based studies in Africa. This sparked my curiosity and I started to think of going beyond lab-based research. I decided to visit OMU, where I learnt about Prof. Kaneko and his work on malaria in Kenya. After the program, I contacted Prof. Kaneko about doing a postdoc in his lab. This marked the beginning of my journey at OMU. Thinking back, I embarked in an international career quite early in my studies and I am very glad that I did. I'd say that networking played a crucial role in shaping my path. It might feel difficult for overseas researchers to find a host supervisor in Japan. For the Summer Program, not knowing about the database of researchers, I simply Googled based on my research topic. I didn't have much time left, and with many websites in Japanese and the time difference, I was afraid of not making it. But I didn't give up and sent several emails and promptly got some replies. Then my PhD supervisor, who knew Prof. Takeda at UTokyo, suggested that I contacted him. Given the pre-existing connection and the research background, he was the best option for me. He accepted my research

proposal and helped me tailor it to the lab's expertise. We had a long exchange of emails, ideas, and online meetings to develop a feasible work plan. I believe that this made our collaboration solid and my application stronger. In fact, finding the right lab involves seeking advice. Having guidance ensures a smoother transition and better understanding of the work environment. To prospective fellows, I highly recommend reaching out to your connections in Japan, if you already have any, or if you don't, like me at the time, establishing new ones and starting familiarising with the Japanese academic landscape.

Depending on your priorities, you might focus on a particular field or professor. Or, if you are flexible about the topic, you might prioritise the location. There are many ways to choose a lab! Ask your friends, search databases, read papers, find authors. Talk to colleagues, send emails, and above all, try to gain an understanding of the environment and atmosphere in the lab. Building good relationships is crucial for a positive experience!

Conferences and social media are good platforms to expand your network. Once a connection is established, it's important to nurture it. Reach out, participate in lab meetings, be proactive, and show your interest! Whether in person or online, staying connected is vital. The Summer Program was an amazing experience that fuelled my desire to return to Japan. Back in Sweden, although I had to focus on completing my PhD, I stayed in touch with my colleagues in Japan. At Karolinska Institutet I had the chance to meet Prof. Kaneko in person and discuss a project proposal. He welcomed me to join his team, upon securing my own funding. So, I started looking for grants. I knew that JSPS had some appealing postdoc programs and given my positive experience, it was the first option that came to my mind. I started working on



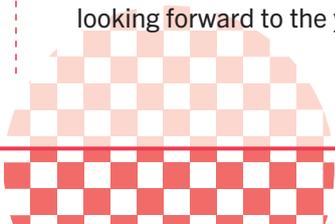
my project proposal while I was doing my PhD. Upon graduating, I visited the field in Kenya. This was crucial to understand the work dynamics and fully comprehend the research background. I participated in fieldwork activities while applying to all the fellowships that I could find, although JSPS remained my target. After a few rejections, including from JSPS, eventually at the second round I managed to secure the Short-term (max 1 year) fellowship. This was a strategic move: while the JSPS Standard Program (max 2 years) prevents subsequent applications, Short-term fellows are allowed to apply for the Standard Program. It was a bit of a bet, but thankfully my application got approved and I could secure a total of three years with JSPS. Compared to other fellowships, which might be tight to a specific location and schedule, I think JSPS offers more flexibility. In my case for example, I work from home, the lab, the office, or even from Kenya when I need to visit the field. As a JSPS researcher, you associate to your host supervisor's university without being employed by it. This allows for more independence. I like to think of it as being a freelance researcher!

—Please explain the experience of participating in JSPS's multiple fellowship programs and the benefits you have gained from that:

For me, having a global network of friends and colleagues is one of the best parts of being a researcher. Compared to my experience in Europe, it's a bit harder to interact with other researchers in Japan, mainly due to the language and the very tight working schedules of Japanese researchers. At domestic conferences, most talks are in Japanese and there are fewer opportunities for mingling. However, with a bit of perseverance and (politely!) putting myself forward without too much hesitation, I've managed to build strong connections. Same goes for the personal life. Thus, despite the language barrier and other difficulties, I was able to make valuable connections through the length of my stay in multiple programs and through my own efforts and persistence. I also organized a small poster session at OMU, which was enthusiastically received by the university faculty. As my community grows, I manage to stay connected to my colleagues via the several Alumni associations, including the JSPS Alumni network.

—What made you decide to develop your career in Japan, and what are the merits of living in Japan, such as convenience of living?

I haven't defined my future plans yet, but I am trying to make the most out of this unique experience which extends beyond research. Participating in international programs such as the JSPS ones is an opportunity to expand our network, explore new fields and engage in interdisciplinary projects, while learning about another culture and lifestyle. Thanks to these fellowships, I've realized that I enjoy fieldwork and international projects, and I am using the skills and knowledge that I acquired to drive my career path forward. Reflecting on my attraction to Japan, I realise that I've always been drawn to Asia, and particularly to Japan. Its culture and nature have always fascinated me and growing up watching Japanese anime maybe played a part too! The Summer Program was a fantastic experience and definitely nurtured this feeling. Generally, I enjoy exploring new environments and challenging myself, for example to adapt to new habits. Of course, living abroad has also its challenges and sometimes I miss home... However, being immersed in such a different culture as the Japanese one is profoundly enriching my life, as I keep on learning new things that change myself and the way I think and live. In fact, I often face situations that surprise me and force me to reconsider my attitudes. I think it's an amazing opportunity to get to know myself and the world around me better. Also, I am particularly enjoying the possibility of safely and easily going almost anywhere in the country simply by catching a train. Of course, not to mention the food! As for the language, although I don't need Japanese at work or to survive, I think it is important to be able to communicate to locals and to feel more part of the society. Personally, I enjoy being able to express myself and feel independent. So, I would recommend trying to learn at least some Japanese, especially for a longer stay. It will definitely enrich your experience!! In summary, my experience in Japan has, so far, been very fulfilling. Both from a personal and professional perspective, the time I've spent here and the people I've met have already profoundly shaped my life and career path in a way that I would have never expected. I am very grateful to JSPS for this opportunity and looking forward to the years to come!





Kyoto University  
Graduate School of Medicine

Richard Veale

**Career**

2018- Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Medicine, Kyoto University

JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowships for Research in Japan

2015-2017 Standard Program at Kyoto University

2014-2015 Short-term Program at National Institute for Physiological

2013-2014 Strategic Program at National Institute for Physiological Sciences

2013 Summer Program at National Institute for Physiological Sciences

—What made you decide to apply for JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowships for Research in Japan, and to participate in multiple fellowship programs?

During the summer of 2012, I attended a conference in Sapporo, Hokkaido held by the Cognitive Science Society, which offered a special travel grant. That allowed me to spend a week at Professor Isa's lab, and then join the JSPS Summer Program at his lab the following year.

I knew of Professor Isa through his publications and a mutual friend who introduced me, and chose him as my host researcher because of his global expertise in my field of research. His lab has great resources, international connections, and experience in hosting researchers from abroad.

To find a host researcher, connections through your advisor or someone in the host's network is useful. Or, a mutual acquaintance can facilitate an introduction, or even befriending Japanese students studying abroad can help. Building connections can open up research opportunities and also provide a good network of friends for when living in Japan.

Some institutions, like Seiriken\*<sup>1</sup>, have good resources, guest housing, and English-speaking administrative support, which helps with a long-term stay. Although platforms like researchmap can help identify relevant researchers, an introduction is the most reliable method in the scientific community.

I applied for JSPS Postdoctoral Fellowships for Research in Japan primarily to work with Professor Isa. Securing my own funding through JSPS gave me autonomy while supporting the host researcher financially. JSPS funding

was comparable to grants in the US or EU, and offers relative freedom. This freedom is invaluable to researchers like me, as it allows you to pursue your own interests. While some hosts prioritize project completion, others encourage more exploratory approaches. JSPS grants provide the flexibility needed for such pursuits.

I had various opportunities to pursue postdoctoral positions in other countries. While many of these involved direct hiring by the hosting lab, Japan stood out as the JSPS program provided more freedom and offered a prestigious fellowship.

I opted for multiple fellowship programs because they allowed longer projects, building upon each other. For instance, I developed a brain simulator in the initial fellowship, which I then used for stimulation experiments. As fellowship durations are limited—ranging from Summer (2 months) to Short-term (1 to 12 months) to Standard (12 to 24 months)—I started with a one-year term to see what it was like, before applying for the standard term to delve deeper into the projects or start new ones. I wanted to continue working on intriguing projects while enjoying the freedom of these fellowships. Additionally, my positive experience of living in Japan during the initial fellowship made me seek other opportunities here.

—Please explain the experience of participating in JSPS's multiple fellowship programs and the benefits you have gained from that.

Participating in multiple JSPS fellowship programs lets you develop strong networks and invaluable skills. Writing fellowship proposals is pivotal for a career in research, especially when applying for grants like KAKENHI\*<sup>2</sup>. Even though the JSPS Summer Program is short, I've stayed in touch with other participants, as well as fellows from other programs and fields.



\*Image 1



\*Image 2

The shared experience fostered friendships that have lasted, even after becoming a professor. I met intellectually stimulating individuals and was able to build a network across scientific disciplines and research areas.

This network built through fellowships and the host researcher is crucial when organizing collaborations and applying for grants, which often require collaboration among diverse researchers. As a faculty member, I leverage this by inviting them as guest lecturers to discuss topics like magnetic chip development or nanotechnology. The network also offers potential for interdisciplinary research collaboration.

Participating in the JSPS Science Dialogue was highly beneficial for my career. Engaging with smart and creative students from Super Science High Schools\*<sup>3</sup> was both enjoyable and stimulating, and also helped me communicate effectively and convey complex concepts. This was a valuable experience that has helped me present research to diverse audiences. Also, one dialogue I conducted in Shizuoka led to a useful link with a former student who founded a leading robotics company. Moreover, the teachers at Super Science High Schools\*<sup>3</sup> often have extensive connections with former students who may go on to become renowned professors or CEOs, which can lead to valuable introductions. I have such good memories of the JSPS Science Dialogue and its enriching experience.

—What made you decide to develop your career in Japan, and what are the merits of living in Japan, such as convenience of living?

The decision to build my career in Japan was somewhat lucky. Initially arriving for a postdoctoral position, I gradually expanded my networks, including through the JSPS fellowship. As my fellowship neared

its end, a professorial position unexpectedly became available, presenting a significant career opportunity, so I took it. If this position had not materialized, I would likely have pursued opportunities in Europe or returned to the US, as there were no other prospects in Japan. Living in Japan offers many advantages: the convenience of an outstanding public transit

system; organization and cleanliness; safety for individuals, families, and women walking outside at night; a diverse climate; various activities for personal enjoyment, whether skiing in Hokkaido or playing Frisbee. All this contributes to quality of life here. I can speak Japanese and use it in both daily life and work. Japanese is invaluable when working with companies, handling administrative tasks, dealing with landlords, playing sports with Japanese teammates, and so forth. Although English is the norm in research at the university, daily activities outside the university require Japanese. I began studying Japanese as an undergraduate, including one year at ICU (International Christian University). As my proficiency improved, it helped me during subsequent visits to Japan, including the JSPS Summer Program. Speaking the language also enhances the overall experience and opens up opportunities, especially in smaller universities or specific host labs. In summary, Japanese language ability is vital for thriving in academia and society in Japan. Japan has many top scientists and researchers, making it an attractive destination for collaboration, as well as working with leading companies. The Japanese government actively supports collaboration with industry partners and real-world applications, particularly in technology. It also offers KAKENHI, and it seems to be easier to get funding for innovative ideas here than in the US.

\*1 National Institute for Physiological Sciences (NIPS) of the National Institutes of Natural Sciences (NINS)

\*2 Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research: competitive research funds in Japan <https://www.jsps.go.jp/english/e-grants/>

\*3 Super Science High School (SSH) : The system Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) specifies for high schools that focus their education on science and math.

\*Image 1: Richard Veale with Tadashi Isa and Mee Phonphanphanee (in Bangkok, Thailand)

\*Image 2: Professor Isa's lab in Okazaki, Aichi circa 2015