

Campus News

"By the students, for the students" "By the students, for the students" "By the students, for the students"

Recent Issues Affecting Mobility of Foreign Students at KU

By Rika Yamao

The number of foreign exchange students studying in Japan has been gradually increasing. Especially, the students from Asia and Southeast Asia account for a large part of the foreign student population studying abroad at universities in Japan. Also, most Japanese students do not pay so much attention to their situation despite the increasing number of foreign exchange students at schools like Kochi University.

This story reports on a recent issue that affects the daily lives of foreign exchange students. We hope our readers will think more about some of the challenges these students face while living and studying in Japan.

During the past academic year, all foreign students on campus have been asked to sign in once a month at Kochi University's International Office in the Center for International Collaboration. The Center is responsible for taking care of students who come from outside to study in Japan.

This issue of signing in monthly is a new procedure that international students must do. It was started from summer 2019. What is the reason for this? Why must foreign students sign in and not Japanese students? Is this the result of an incident which occurred at a university in Tokyo that lost contact with hundreds of foreign students? Does this affect their human rights? Are Japanese universities asking too much of them? Does this issue affect their mobility within Japan? Are all Japanese universities requiring students to check in each month? I had many questions about this issue so I asked teachers and students what they thought about this issue.

As a start in getting some perspective on this issue, I sought some comments from concerned faculty members who are supervising undergraduate foreign students. I interviewed Professor Naohito Mori from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Kochi University. He was concerned about why the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has ordered universities to regularly check their foreign students' attendance confirmation.

"One concern I have is that not all professors were fully aware of this initiative," Prof. Mori said. While it may be reasonable that Japanese students are not aware of this issue, it is hard to imagine that some professors do not know. This indicates that many people might not know the importance of MEXT's order, and what it potentially means to foreign students who have done nothing wrong but have new restrictions in their everyday life.

Prof. Mori wondered whether we should think about this initiative as a problem because most of the foreign students do not seem to be overly concerned with it. However, at the same time, he felt caution was required. "The new monthly attendance check might possibly become a limitation on the basic human rights of foreign students because of its mandatory nature," he said.

Japan has to support them while they are living and studying in Japan and, in fact, Prof. Mori expressed his respect and appreciation for the administrative staff from Center for International Collaboration who work daily with foreign students to ensure their well-being. But on the surface, many worry that this seems more like control than support.

We are concerned that if foreign students do not sign into the center, MEXT will then know this and the student will be contacted. A worst-case scenario regarding this is that it could potentially, in some unforeseen way, negatively affect foreign students or their status here in Japan. For example, in matters related to their visa status. Making this action mandatory also raises a question of equality between Japanese students and foreign

students.

In the first place, the notion of human rights is different from country to country. It is taken very seriously in Europe, for example. Prof. Mori noted that the people who are in a position of strength can protect themselves and don't have to worry about their human rights. But having basic human rights is the only way to protect those people who are in a more vulnerable position – like foreign exchange students.

To get a broader sense of this issue and its impact, I asked my friends who are foreign students about how they are feeling about this issue. All of them answered the same. They said that they did not care about the issue so much and did not think about it so seriously, which was unexpected to us. None of them felt like it was a human rights problem.

"Such rules and restrictions may in some way become even stricter in the future"

–Naohito Mori

Actually, many felt it was a positive initiative. They can get the chance to talk to more people at the Center. For many, knowing that the Center staff are regularly checking on them is comforting. Furthermore, the Center staff seem to be caring for them and supporting them so they do not feel that their rights are compromised. It's possible therefore that signing in every month can be seen as a good way to protect them rather than limit them.

Another teacher, Prof. Darren Lingley noted that foreign exchange students, especially those from Asia, may be used to following bureaucratic procedures

without too much complaint. "Many are studying here and don't know so much about the rules of the host institution," he said. "This means that if students are asked to sign in once a month, then they tend to simply see that as a rule to follow, and don't make much fuss about it. Quite frankly, I was surprised more wasn't made of this issue. If I had done nothing wrong, I wouldn't want a new restriction placed on me."

It is not sure what will come of this initiative from now on, and whether it will continue. One worry is that it is possible such rules and restrictions may in some way become even stricter in the future. Prof. Mori insisted that even if the foreign students do not think about their human rights so seriously we still have to care about such rights for each other. "A person who has freedom, and a person who has freedom but without the guarantee that their freedom is not violated, are not equal," he said

Our foreign student friends and classmates now have other worries too. With the outbreak of the new coronavirus, all students and faculty are being affected in their potential travels, both domestically and internationally. Many of our foreign exchange students are from China and they are either worrying about family back home, or have had their travel plans restricted. Many may be wondering about the dangers of going back to China and may wish to extend their study visas for safety reasons. We hope the Japanese government and Kochi University, and all universities, will be as quick to act positively in this regard as they were to act negatively about requiring monthly attendance checks.

We are wondering what our readers think. Do you think that this is a problem related to violation of human rights? Did KU do the right thing by requiring foreign students to check in monthly? We encourage all students and staff to think about the vulnerable position that foreign students are in during these challenging times.

Our 17th Edition: *KU Campus News!* Read all about it!

The Kochi University Campus News aims to present a voice for the students of our university. It is meant to profile the great potential of the many KU students who take initiative and action during their university days. There is much to learn from the experiences of those who have taken the first step in making something special and unique from their university experience.

This newspaper will introduce some of the people who might inspire other students. These people encourage us to try something new. Although it is hard to try things that we are not sure about, it is very important for us as university students, to take advantage of our time here and make the most of our opportunities. Now is the time to think about our future and gain valuable life experiences.

The purpose of publishing *The Kochi University Campus News* is to inform students about what is happening around the campus. Profiling students from the various faculties helps us to see what other students are interested in. We believe students will see that our university is a lot more dynamic than we might think. It's a small local university, but all students have the potential to open up their world. As we present some aspects of our university, we hope that this will give students an opportunity to think

about how university life should be, and inspire students to be more active in their learning.

Another ongoing feature of this newspaper is to promote the many international aspects of our campus. As always, our focus is on the word 'exchange'. There are many international students, teachers, and researchers here at Kochi University, and there are many Japanese students who are involved with international projects. Hearing about them helps us to understand more, start friendships and develop relationships. International opportunities abound for us, both inside and outside Japan. Let's learn more about these opportunities and do what we can to fulfill our potential. Profiling this aspect of our campus is good for us as students.

Last, but not least, we would like to follow the lead of the students who have worked hard on the *KU Campus News* over the past years. This newspaper represents the voice of students. Although we are always trying out new column ideas, the theme remains the same for this 17th edition, "By the students, for the students". We thank you for taking the time to read our paper. Comments, suggestions, criticisms and feedback of any kind are welcome. Please enjoy the stories in this 17th edition!