

TMDU graduates are active at the forefront of their fields in countries worldwide. Studying abroad helped them deepen their knowledge as healthcare professionals, benefiting both their field and patients around of the globe.

## Letters from TMDU Overseas Alumni

Letter 01

### Nippon: Memories in My Heart

**Francis Ekow Dennis**  
Research Fellow, Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, University of Ghana



I GRADUATED FROM the University of Ghana, Legon, with BSc. and MPhil. degrees in biochemistry, after which I worked as a research assistant at the Regional Rotavirus Reference Laboratory, Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR), University of Ghana. In October 2010, I arrived in Japan as a *Mobukagakusho* scholar after almost 20 hours of flying from Ghana. I was pleasantly surprised to be picked up at the airport by my extremely kind supervisor and head of department, Prof. Nobuo Ohta, and taken to my hostel at Odaiba. Thus began four wonderfully memorable years in Japan.

I first heard about TMDU in 2009, when the NMIMR-TMDU research collaboration was formally launched. The Public Health Leader Course, a specially crafted PhD program in the Division of Public Health, TMDU, was recommended by my professor, who encouraged me to apply. I had a keen interest in infectious diseases, and appreciated the need for generating relevant data to inform decisions on the health needs of vulnerable populations. The flexibility

of the program at such a respected institution was a perfect match, and I consider myself privileged to have enrolled, graduating with a PhD in Medical Science in 2014. While encouraging excellence in my chosen research field, the program also provided a platform for interaction with colleagues from different countries, as well as WHO public health experts, which helped shape my perspectives and taught me invaluable lessons. My research on the complete genomic characterization of rotavirus strains circulating in Ghana before vaccine introduction using next-generation sequencing involved working with rotavirus experts across Japan. TMDU greatly facilitated this.

I am currently a Research Fellow in the Department of Electron Microscopy and Histopathology, NMIMR, University of Ghana, where I focus on the use of molecular diagnostic platforms and epidemiological tools to answer questions of public health importance, especially pertaining to diarrhoeal diseases. My relationship with TMDU continues with the Japan Agency for Medical Re-



Recalling a funny incident while addressing staff and students of the Department of Environmental Parasitology, TMDU, at my farewell party, September 2014

search and Development (AMED)-sponsored TMDU-NMIMR Joint Research project on infectious diseases, describing the molecular epidemiology of gastroenteritis pathogens in Ghanaian children.

I spent the first six months in the *Kenshu* program learning Japanese language and culture. The events, trips and activities organized by Prof. Yoko Okita and her team were great fun, helping me overcome culture shock and homesickness. My favorite event was *omochitsuki* (preparing rice cakes), which I was pleasantly surprised to learn was similar to preparation of *fufu* back home in Ghana. I remember the kindness of the University President Prof. Takashi Ohyama in allowing a classmate and myself to join the customary sponsored trip to Hakone in our final year (missed previously because cancelled due to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of March 2011). I also had opportunities to share about my country at TMDU,

Ichikawa Elementary School and Bun-kyo City Hall. The staff of the International Students Office were always helpful. I had all the help I needed every step of the way.

In the Department of Environmental Parasitology, I found a family. Faculty and students were all so kind and helpful, making me feel at home right from

the start. The regular reporting on my research progress at rigorous journal club meetings was good training and academically stimulating. It was not always work, though. I have many fond memories of fun times: my welcome party and first attempt at eating sushi, cooking for parties and storytelling, birthday celebrations and weddings,

cherry blossom, fireworks, a Tokyo Bay cruise, gifts at my farewell party...

The story of my life is incomplete without my time in Japan. Everyone now says I have become Japanese. I hope to give back the good I received from Japan. The memories of my unforgettable Nippon experience will always remain in my heart.

Letter 02

### An Inspiring Experience: Bringing Together Science, Art, and Culture



**Nurtami Soedarsono**  
Lecturer, Department of Oral Biology, Universitas Indonesia



ON BEING ACCEPTED for the PhD program at TMDU in 2001, I started preliminary studies with a six-month Japanese language intensive program. My days were filled with Japanese language and culture, which helped me adjust to my new life in Japan. I began the PhD program in the Department of Molecular Pathology (now Department of Oral Pathology) in 2002. My advisers were Professor Minoru Takagi and Professor Akira Yamaguchi. I studied oral pathology and did molecular research. I also trained in oral pathology diagnosis at the hospital. My biggest challenge was to read and understand medical records written in Japanese. But with help from teachers and Japanese friends, I was able to find a way.

I completed my research at RIKEN Yokohama Institute under the supervision of Professor Yoshiyuki Sakaki and Team Leader Professor Toshio Kojima. In a sophisticated research facility, I studied the human genome and the genetics background of several diseases. I felt privileged to be working at the university laboratory, the university hospital, and a research center. The work was tough but worth it. And what I learned about the campus system and the research environment could be implemented at my university in Indonesia.

Aspiring to live a balanced life, I ex-

plored leisure opportunities too. I joined Tokyo International Singers, where I made friends from all over the world. We practiced on weekends and performed concerts at several Tokyo venues. The experience of performing with a professional orchestra was amazing. At Tokyo International Exchange Center in Odaiba, where I spent my final two years, students joined together, engaging in cultural exchanges at events. On campus, I sometimes gave cultural performances at TMDU events.

On returning to Indonesia, I resumed teaching and research at my alma mater. I did a JSPS Joint-Research Fellowship with the Department of Molecular Craniofacial Embryology under the supervision of Associate Professor Masaaki Ikeda from 2007 to 2009. Together, we established collaboration with the Indonesian Dharmas National Cancer Hospital in oral cancer research. We have been doing several research projects together ever since.

Apart from my main duties at the university, I was appointed to establish the Indonesian National Police DNA Laboratory, a facility for human DNA profiling. Soon afterward, I became one of the DNA leading experts and a permanent DNA consultant at the laboratory. Our main job at the DNA lab is to help police investigations for national and



At the Indonesian National Police DNA Laboratory

international cases. I am also responsible for human DNA research work and the lab's personnel development. I have been involved in many high-profile investigation cases: disasters, terrorism, human trafficking, and human rights. The beneficial impact of my experience at TMDU and RIKEN in the real world exceeded my expectations. I think that whereas applied research is more highly valued than basic research in Indonesia, the situation is different in Japan.

As a faculty member, I served as a students' manager from 2006 to 2008 who supervised students' welfare, exchange programs, and activities. Then, I was appointed assistant director of the Universitas Indonesia postgraduate program from 2011 to 2013. I just finished my term as Associate Dean for Resources, Venture and General Administration (2014-2018). I have also been serving as a national reviewer for the selection process of the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education Scholarships and Fulbright Research Fellowships. In this role, I help graduates pursue their dreams in higher education.

I am looking forward to working with TMDU through research, students' programs, and other opportunities to strengthen the collaboration between TMDU and the Universitas Indonesia.