

Opening Remarks

Introduction of the International Exchange Initiative by Kochi University

Katutoshi Sakurai

Director of General and Glocal Affairs, and Vice President, Kochi University

Welcome to Kochi! On behalf of Kochi University, I would like to thank you all for joining us at the 11th International Kuroshio Science Symposium. It is indeed a distinct pleasure and honor for us to have you here, especially given the remote location of the venue.

In line with the main theme of this Symposium, “Cross-border Network for Research and Education”, I would like to provide you with a very quick overview of the international strategy being deployed to expand and promote “glocal” (global+local) two-way collaboration, which is our university’s primary objective. Assisting global human resource development and promoting two-way international exchange are its two main pillars. Contrary to what some people imagine, even though we are in a remote part of Japan, far away from big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, we have at our disposal plenty of topics to study and problems worth addressing which, if successfully solved, may lead to worldwide development. Yet, we are increasingly aware that, in order to succeed, the most appropriate tactic is not the one-way, but the two way approach or “glocalization”, as I call it these days.

It is quite clear by now that to tackle regional issues we need to develop a global perspective, for regional issues resonate worldwide. Conducting collaborative research and fostering international exchange are, therefore, of utmost importance. At present, Kochi Prefecture is actively promoting collaboration in the fields of agriculture, forestry, fishery industry, community health care, rural education and disaster risk management, which are also top priority issues for Kochi University.

From my experience as a soil scientist working in international collaboration projects in rural areas, within and outside of Japan, for more than thirty years, I have realized that conducting collaborative research is mutually rewarding and highly effective. The main reason being that, in this part of Japan, we actually share many of the same problems experienced throughout Southeast Asia. Although my major is soil science, I mostly worked in the mountain regions with local communities in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia, and everywhere the main concerns were essentially the same: How to survive, and how to implement and/or maintain

sustainability level conditions in those places. Just like it is the case here in Kochi, the young generation is migrating to the urban areas, while rural areas are becoming depopulated: The only difference being that Kochi is the top runner in this world competition.

In order to increase international exchange, which is a very important topic here at Kochi University, we are currently building up a network of international alumni to strengthen our bonds and stimulate further international exchange as well as to recruit new students and researchers. To this purpose we have already opened liaison offices in China, Thailand and Sweden, and a fourth one is under consideration in Vietnam. This year we have about fifty international exchange students on long term study programs and about twenty five Japanese students undergoing long term study abroad. In this way, we hope to increase our student’s interest in Asian countries as their destination of choice. Personally, I always strongly recommend southeast Asian countries, not only because of the good feelings and experiences that I have from working in this part of the world, but also because of the wide range of common issues that we share. This, of course, involves sending out a lot of information in English for the overseas students, which is still somehow of a challenge, but we are getting better at it.

As you may have noticed, Kochi’s main asset is the richness of its natural environment: probably the richest in Japan. A highly diverse environment that ranges from the high mountain peaks to the deepest sea floor valleys just within 10km off shore. Among other features, it boasts a vast forest area comprising 83.3% of the land (a surprisingly higher rate even in Japan), more than half of which is a planted forest, not a natural forest, that dates back to the Edo or samurai Era- about 300 years ago -, when promotion of tree plantation was started as a future investment. Ironically, the cost of mountain forest control and management is so high nowadays that logging is no longer a commercially viable activity: add to this the shortage of manpower, due to the aging population and the present economic recession, and you can easily imagine the bleak situation of the land owners. Another typical feature of Kochi is higher rainfall rates in the mountainous area of East Kochi, e.g., annual rainfall of 2014 was 3,659 mm. This value exceeds that in the tropical countries and it is the highest in Japan. Even in Kochi city, the average is 2,000 mm to 2,500mm per year. In fact, the rainfall pattern in Kochi is similar to the squalls in tropical countries. But here they last longer (often more than 2 hours) and sometimes lead to serious floods. I shall skip any attempt to mention the Kuroshio current, and the marine environment, already well-known to all of you, as is the main topic of this symposium and you will

be hearing about it from the other participants.

Based on these regional environmental conditions, we strive to perform international collaboration making use of what we have. The first priority is on the international collaboration with Asian and Oceanian countries. As an example, working with our Indonesian partners, we have established a “Six University Initiative, Japan and Indonesia” (SUIJI) consortium which consists of three universities from Japan, i.e., Kochi University, Kagawa University and Ehime University, and three universities from Indonesia, i.e., Bogor Agricultural University, Gadjah Mada University, and Hasanuddin University. The main goal of the consortium is to solve the practical problems endangering the sustainability of tropical agriculture. This program involves a large number of exchange students and instructors every year.

On a different note, implementing JICA training programs has also become one of the most important activities of our international affairs. Three major programs per year of approximately one month duration, attended by professionals from around the world, are actually underway. The “Comprehensive Disaster Management Program” deals with measures and countermeasures that are used in Kochi against natural disasters such as landslides, earthquakes and tsunami: hazards which strike us almost every year due to the peculiar topography and geology of the area. The “Remote Areas Education Program” is aimed at improving education in rural or isolated areas where the number of children has dropped so much as to force the closure or the merging of local schools and where the teachers have to deal with several grades in one class. And The “Inclusive education Program” is directed towards strengthening effective teaching and proper treatment of students with physical and mental disabilities and those facing problems during integration to different cultural environments. This particular topic is the subject of intensive research by Kochi University faculty staff.

We are also promoting a new target for research: The Four Dimensional Kuroshio Marine Science (4D KMS) Program. This program comprises four axes; from the mountain top to the bottom of the ocean, from the coast to offshore, from the Philippines to Japan and the fourth dimension which is time.

Besides all these developments, we have also been working on a reorganization of Kochi University. In 2015 the Faculty of Regional Collaboration was established as our sixth faculty. It accepts 60 students per annum and presently has 240 students supported by 25 instructors. The main job of the teaching staff, in addition to the lectures, is the facilitation of the students training in the region. The teachers consistently work with the students throughout the four years. This is a new “concept” of faculty, that should allow the students, after graduation, to take their own independent decision in every

circumstance they may face. The following year, in 2016, the former Faculty of Agriculture was restructured as the Faculty of Agriculture and Marine Science. In so doing, we wish to stress the importance of the marine sciences given that Japan is surrounded by the sea and we need to do more research in marine science. Then, in 2017 the Faculty of Science became the Faculty of Science and Technology, whereby we want to add more emphasis on technology, particularly on the integration of theory and practice and its application to rural environments, and to promote further enhancement of the disaster research output. As I mentioned above, Kochi is a disaster-prone area and we consider it our duty to provide to the public both more human resources and scientific evidence.

Integrating different academic disciplines within particular research areas is an extremely important approach that should be encouraged, both in education and research, and even embraced as a university discipline in itself. Moreover, if we are truly committed to solving global issues such as resource management and environmental control, I can see no better way ahead than to procure multidisciplinary collaboration among our different institutions across borders. It is my hope that such a valuable message can one day be derived from the experience of studying together in Kochi.

As a summary, our vision is to make the most of what we have. While taking advantage of the surrounding environment, we should act wisely and with a wider vision as we make use of our natural resources. Two quick examples: Kochi produces a vast amount of vegetables, but the farmers were not making as much profit as they could. What can be done to improve the situation? Answer: Kochi University and our Prefectural government work together to and put more value to these products through scientific and marketing research. And it is working. Then there is the case of the small villages scattered throughout the vast mountain areas, now practically inhabited by old people. As part of our position of Center of the Community, we at Kochi University see it as our local mission to support them with local events, health care and education. And we also deal with oceanic plate and other natural disasters through joint management and prevention. As for Kuroshio zone related issues, we need to have a strong and sustainable relationship with South East Asia and establish robust and comprehensible collaborative research programs that incorporate the characteristics of the Kochi area.

Based on these initiatives, we are seriously aspiring to become a “Super-Regional University” within Japan as well as in the world. Make sure to join us in this effort!