

▪ Topics : Letters from alumni

Graduated in 2000 from Faculty of Science Department of Mathematics Currently, head of the Benesse Corporation office in Beijing, China

It has been twelve years since I graduated from Okayama University. Looking back on my time at there, I am reminded of how that experience has been the driving force that propelled me into my current position. Today I would like to share some of my memories from university and work.

After joining Benesse, I spent about ten years in Japan doing sales and product development, after which I was sent to our Shanghai office in 2009. There was a company-wide call for applications for the China post, and I decided to give it a shot because penetrating the Chinese market seemed like a good way to test my strengths. These days, growth in the Chinese education business is covered in international news bulletins but when I came to China this was not a popular destination for work postings and we at Benesse were only just starting to get things off the ground. We have since relocated the base of our Chinese operations to Beijing, and we spend our days busily holding events to promote Benesse's Shimajiro series of learning aids among Chinese kids and operating our network of branches.

At Okayama University, not only were classes challenging, but the weekly assignments I got from the Tasaka seminar, which focused on algebraic number theory, involved hours of looking at reference materials and doing drills before I could complete them. My lasting impression is that the academic work was a genuine challenge that took a lot of patience and tenacity rather than simply learning formulae and solving puzzles. Meanwhile, I had also joined the tennis club and organizing myself so that I achieved a proper balance between club activities and my studies really helped me grow as a person.

Okayama University is a comprehensive institution, so joining an extracurricular club was a good way to make friends with people studying in faculties that were completely unrelated to science, such as law, arts, and economics. Indeed, these clubs help broaden your horizons. Given the apparent incongruence of a mathematics major ending up working at the overseas office of an education company, it is quite possible that my fate was influenced by having friends in such a broad range of fields.

Working overseas, I have learned that different countries have different lifestyles, customs, and cultures. When discussing projects with colleagues, we get a lot of different opinions so it takes real leadership to coordinate everyone together into coherent action—it's hard work. At those times, my behavior is based formed on the training I underwent at math seminars because it is important when trying to get people to do something that you change their behavior gradually based on facts and numbers. In this way, the things I learned at university are proving useful in my management work.

I have learned that there are surprisingly many things that cannot be fully understood until you try them. So often, things don't go as we hoped and I have experienced as much failure as the next man. Whenever we hit a wall, it is easy to find excuses to give up or do nothing, but I make a conscious effort to try and come up with ways in which I can move forward with what I was trying to do.

Working in Beijing provides opportunities to connect with businessmen from all around the world and I am proud to tell them that I graduated from Okayama University. One of the areas in which my alma mater invests great effort is fostering a mindset of fellowship among alumni and, as such, the Okayama University alumnus network boasts a strength that many national universities fail to match. For instance, when I was still in Japan, I attended events where graduates going back as far as the old "No. 6 High School" (Okayama University's predecessor) made a genuine effort to contribute to the development of their successors into well-rounded people. It is my fervent hope that the network expands to incorporate overseas alumni in addition to those in Japan.

When Benesse was first set up in Beijing in 2010, we had just one Shimajiro Shop, but that has since grown to a network of 39 stores. There are now more than 480,000 Shimajiro club members throughout China, and there is a palpable increase in their expectations and demands towards Benesse. The Japanese media constantly talk about the speed of this growth in China, but the surge experienced at Benesse is even more rapid than media reports. So there is considerable pressure during work and but the education I received at Okayama University stands me in good stead for the challenges ahead.