

EMBRACING ASIAN LAW CENTRE COMMUNITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES: ALUMNI GATHERING OF JAPANESE JUDICIAL VISITORS

Stacey Steele*



The threat of COVID-19 has caused us to rethink how we interact – with each other, as a public institution at the University and even with our visitors. In this post, A/Professor Stacey Steele considers new opportunities created by COVID-19 which are helping the Asian Law Centre embrace communities in new ways after speaking to our Japanese judicial alumni recently.

Japanese Judicial Visitors at the Asian Law Centre from 2003

I recently contributed a chapter to a book co-edited by my colleague at the University of Melbourne, Professor Akihiro Ogawa. The book is called [New Frontiers in Japanese Studies](#) and my chapter is titled, “Sending them over the seas: Japanese judges crossing legal boundaries through lived experiences in Australia”. The chapter was based on questionnaire responses from judges who visited the Asian Law Centre for 12 months each from 2003 to 2014. Writing the chapter provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my role hosting Japanese judicial visitors at the [Asian Law Centre, Melbourne Law](#)

[School since 2003.](#)

Few Japanese judges have the time to study overseas before becoming a judge – or even have a part-time job – as they strive to join the ranks of this elite career system. The Supreme Court of Japan-sponsored program sees Japanese judges and court clerks travel overseas to study, train and research every year. The goal of the program is to provide highly-educated Japanese legal professionals access to new and diverse thinking and experiences to better equip them for dealing with complex situations. It has been an honour to [host 17 Japanese judges](#) since the program began.

However, staying in touch can be difficult after judges return to Japan. They have heavy caseloads, more responsibility which comes with career advancement, personal matters to attend to, and regular court transfers to deal with. In the chapter, I concluded that:

the questionnaire responses suggest that Japanese judges find their own ways to stay connected, including through social media and in-person visits, but the quality of any professional interaction after they return to Japan is not clear.

At the time of writing, I was thinking about ways to stay in touch and improve the longer-term intellectual outcomes for the program.

Little did I know that COVID-19 would help us start to find solutions...

Impact of COVID-19 on Visitors...

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the University was very concerned for our visitors, including our current judicial guests. In addition to the general and serious concerns for health and safety, we knew it would be difficult for them to complete their missions as Victoria went into lockdown and the University went online. This disruption caused us to consider our options. Like the Melbourne Law School, which is using video conferencing and other web-based

delivery platforms, we decided to move part of our program online too!

We established a virtual “Coffee Club” with weekly meetings for our current visitors. Initially, we thought that it would be a platform to check in with everyone. However, we quickly decided that it was an opportunity for more in-depth academic discussions and engagement. We started inviting speakers, the first speaker being Ms Reagan Grayson-Morrison, an Associate of the Asian Law Centre, former Research Assistant and now Victorian barrister, who spoke about the response to COVID-19 at Victorian courts. Since then, we’ve been joined by five former or sitting Australian judges, a VCAT member, other Australian lawyers and Melbourne Law School academic colleagues, along with our current Asian Law Centre research assistants. Our visitors have also used the opportunity to present their own research and update participants about the current situation in their own jurisdictions. With the help of Australian judges, lawyers and academics, we have created an informative and intellectually stimulating virtual discussion space.

New Formats Lead to New ideas

The success of the Coffee Club got me thinking about my concerns about staying in touch with our alumni judiciary. Previously, I hosted lunches or dinners with them when I visited Japan. One year, I visited two alumni judges who happened to be stationed in regional Japan and saw their court. The reality of COVID-19 means that it’s not clear when these face-to-face meetings can happen again. These meetings also revolve around our personal relationships and don’t necessarily build on the judges’ interest and experience in the Australian legal system. So, what to do?

Last month, we held our first virtual alumni meeting! I was hesitant to suggest the meeting at first – would it be interpreted as somehow “rude” or a “poor substitute”...?

The answer is “no”. I am delighted to report that 15 of our 17 alumni attended the meeting (with apologies from our two other judges who were called away urgently for work). It was the first time that some judges had met each other, as they are currently stationed all over Japan – from Hokkaido to Kyushu to Ibaraki, just to name a few places. We all realised for the first time that three of our alumni are currently in Nagoya!

The meeting provided an opportunity to catch up on personal matters – new babies, children at university and school, new and old hobbies – as well as an exchange of information about court responses to COVID-19. Our current visiting judge provided an update from our Coffee Club information exchanges about Australian judicial responses. The gathering was a great success and everyone agreed unanimously to meet again – virtually – on a regular basis to catch up and hear about topics of interest from Australia, even after COVID-19.

Looking to the Future...

Unfortunately, our next visitors, including judges from Japan, have had to postpone their arrival dates due to COVID-19. However, our next Japanese judge has already attended our alumni gathering. We hope that our virtual catch ups will evolve and provide an opportunity to stay in touch and embrace our Asian Law Centre alumni community. Next time I write to report on our program, I hope that I will be reporting on a future with vibrant communities meeting online *and face-to-face* – always with the Asian Law Centre at the epicentre.

* Associate Professor, Asian Law Centre, Melbourne Law School*

** This post reflects my personal opinions. Statements do not represent the views or policies of my employers, past or present, or any other organisation with which I am affiliated.