

# Exploring International Business: A Journey Through Japan

MBA695 Business in Japan

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## **Insights Learned About International Business**

During my trip to Japan, I observed how international partnerships foster shared success. With that, I learned that maintaining mutual relationships is crucial, as your international partner's success directly impacts your own. Gone are the days of simply transactional relationships in the global business landscape. Now, the focus lies on cultivating strong connections with international organizations to create a collaborative environment where all parties benefit. An exemplary demonstration of this lies in the inspiring partnerships between Saint Martin's University and its sister schools in Japan—Mukogawa Women's University and Kobe International University. These collaborations transcend mere academic exchanges, leveraging the unique strengths of each institution to create a platform of shared knowledge and opportunities that drive innovation, foster financial and institutional growth, and streamline both academic and administrative operations. For instance, SMU can integrate the knowledge imparted by our sister schools during this trip, facilitating the adoption of innovative Japanese teaching methods and streamlined administrative practices. This exchange of expertise cultivates substantial institutional growth for all parties involved. These tangible benefits highlight how international partnerships can be a powerful engine, driving institutional development and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Ultimately, such collaborations advance the broader objectives of global cooperation and pave the path for international business success.

But how do we establish these meaningful relationships with our international counterparts? The answer lies in mastering the art of cross-cultural communication. As many of my MBA courses emphasized, understanding the nuances of cultural norms, values, and communication styles is vital when navigating the complexities of global transactions. Every culture has its own unique set of unwritten rules for conducting business, and misunderstanding these norms can lead to offense, damaged trust, and ultimately, a failed partnership. By learning

the “language” of your international counterparts’ culture, you’re essentially building a bridge for effective communication. For instance, if you were to use an assertive approach in a business negotiation, it might be perceived as confrontational within your partner’s cultural context. Educating yourself on what is acceptable in your international business partner’s culture allows you to tailor your approach to foster trust and respect. This principle was perfectly demonstrated by Dr. Lee and Dr. Armer in their interactions with representatives from MWU and KIU. As I observed, they bowed deeply and meticulously exchanged business cards, a display of respect deeply rooted in Japanese cultural traditions. These culturally aware gestures showcased their commitment to understanding and appreciating the cultural nuances of their international counterparts. Such cultural sensitivity paves the way for smoother negotiations, fosters a sense of



collaboration, and lays the groundwork for successful international partnerships. By embracing these differences, businesses can cultivate harmonious relationships on a global scale.

Lastly, I learned that understanding the marketing landscape of countries abroad is crucial for international business success as it allows companies to tailor their strategies to align with local consumer behaviors, cultural nuances, and market dynamics. This cultural and market-specific knowledge is particularly important when it comes to advertising, which can vary significantly from one country to another. For instance, advertising in Japan often emphasizes subtlety, aesthetic appeal, and emotional connection, reflecting the broader cultural values of harmony and respect (Kersey, 2024). In contrast, American advertisements typically focus on direct messaging, individualism, and clear calls to action (Kersey, 2024). During my visit to Japan, I observed how Shiseido’s commercials exemplify this difference. Shiseido, a leading Japanese cosmetics brand, creates advertisements that are visually stunning, artistically crafted,

and often narrative-driven, aiming to evoke an emotional response and build a deep, aspirational connection with the audience. These commercials frequently feature elegant imagery, soft music, and themes of beauty and tranquility, subtly promoting the brand without overtly pushing the product. In the United States, however, Shiseido's approach differs, with advertisements being more straightforward, focusing on product benefits, customer testimonials, and clear calls to action to cater to the American preference for directness and practicality. By understanding these differences, international businesses can develop advertising strategies that are culturally sensitive and more likely to resonate with the target audience, thereby increasing engagement and fostering brand loyalty. This deep cultural insight not only helps avoid potential misunderstandings and cultural faux pas, but also demonstrates a commitment to valuing and respecting the local culture, which is essential for building trust and long term relationships in the international market. Thus, comprehending the marketing landscape of different countries enables businesses to create more effective marketing campaigns that drive success across diverse global markets.

### **How Economic and Political Systems/Policies Impact Business**

During my international experience, I gained a comprehensive understanding of how economic systems, particularly exchange rates, significantly impact businesses. The current state of the exchange rate from USD to Yen serves as a pertinent example. A fluctuating exchange rate between the USD and Yen can create both challenges and opportunities for Japanese businesses. When the Yen weakens against the USD, Japanese products become cheaper and more competitive in international markets, potentially boosting exports and revenue for Japanese firms. However, this same scenario can make imported goods and raw materials more expensive, increasing production costs for Japanese businesses reliant on foreign supplies. This cost pressure can lead to higher prices for consumers or squeezed profit margins for companies. Conversely, a strong Yen makes imports cheaper, benefiting businesses that depend on foreign goods, but it can also make

Japanese products more expensive and less competitive abroad, potentially reducing export volumes. These dynamics influence strategic decisions, such as pricing, sourcing, and market focus. For example, during periods of a weak Yen, Japanese companies might focus on expanding their international market presence to capitalize on their cost advantage. On the other hand, a strong Yen might prompt businesses to seek cost-saving measures or innovate to maintain competitiveness. Furthermore, exchange rate volatility adds a layer of financial risk, necessitating the use of hedging strategies to manage currency exposure (Picardo, 2023). Understanding these economic implications underscores the importance of economic policies and exchange rate trends in shaping business strategies and operational decisions. This knowledge highlights the interconnectedness of global economies and the need for businesses to be agile and responsive to economic fluctuations to sustain their international competitiveness and growth.

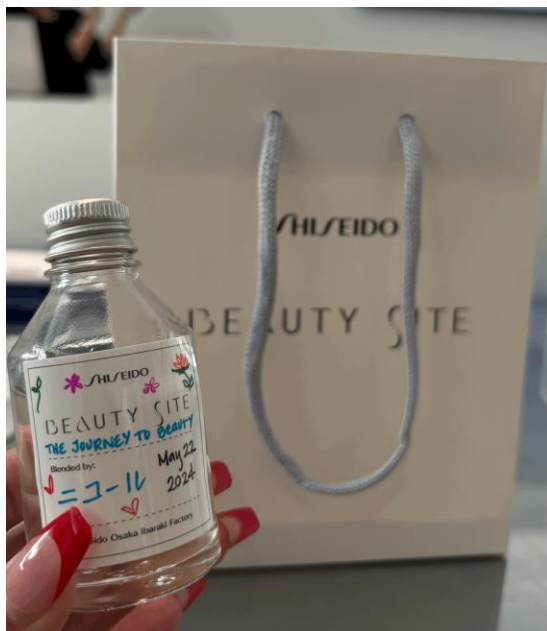
My experience abroad also highlighted the importance of understanding the regulatory environment and its effects on international trade. I noticed many organizations in Japan are adopting green initiatives. For example, hotels are becoming more eco-conscious by encouraging guests to use the entire tissue paper roll instead of replacing it frequently. Also, the Hanshin Tigers stadium aims to be carbon-free by 2025 and Shiseido Osaka Ibaraki Factory is seeking to reduce carbon emissions through vertical integration. With that, it's evident that Japan's embrace of environmentally friendly initiatives significantly impacts its international business operations. The country has implemented various political policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable practices. These initiatives include stringent regulations on industrial emissions, substantial investments in renewable energy, and incentives for companies to adopt green technologies (Kameyama, 2022). For international businesses, these policies mean that companies operating in Japan must comply with high environmental standards, which can initially increase operational costs due to the need for new technologies and processes. However, these

regulations also drive innovation, leading to the development of new, more efficient products and services that can give companies a competitive edge in the global market. Additionally, Japan's commitment to sustainability enhances its reputation and can attract environmentally conscious consumers and investors. This focus on sustainability also opens up opportunities for international collaborations and partnerships in green technology and renewable energy sectors. Overall, Japan's environmental policies not only align with global stability goals, but also reshape the business landscape by fostering innovation and creating new market opportunities.

Another crucial policy affecting how Japan conducts business internationally is its labor policies. Japan faces significant demographic challenges, including an aging population and a shrinking workforce. To address these issues, the Japanese government has introduced various labor policies aimed at improving work-life balance, increasing workforce participation, particularly among women and older workers, and attracting foreign talent (Broinowski, 2023). These policies have a profound impact on international business operations in Japan. Companies are encouraged to adopt more flexible working arrangements and invest in automation and other technologies to maintain productivity levels despite a smaller workforce. Moreover, the push to attract foreign workers creates opportunities for international businesses to bring in diverse talent, fostering a more inclusive and innovative work environment. However, these policies also present challenges, such as navigating visa regulations and cultural integration for foreign employees (Broinowski, 2023). By understanding and adapting to Japan's labor policies, international businesses can better manage their workforce strategies, ensuring they remain competitive and sustainable in the long term. These policies not only address domestic economic issues, but also influence Japan's ability to engage and compete in the global market.

### **Culture and It's Influences on Business Decision-Making**

Exploring how culture influences business decision-making during my in-country experience brought to mind Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, a framework that profoundly articulates the impact of cultural values on organizational behavior and strategic choices. Hofstede's model—which includes dimensions such as power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long vs. short term orientation—provides a comprehensive lens to understand the diverse ways in which cultural norms shape business practices (Nickerson, 2023). Each dimension reveals underlying cultural



preferences and behaviors that significantly influence how businesses operate, make decisions, and interact with their environments. For example, during my visit to the Shiseido Osaka Ibaraki Factory, the dimension of long vs. short term orientation was particularly evident. Shiseido exemplifies a long-term orientation culture, where the focus is on future rewards, perseverance, and sustainable growth. The company's strategic investment in research and development to innovate and improve their beauty

products highlights a commitment to long-term success rather than seeking immediate profits. This approach not only fosters product quality and customer loyalty, but also ensures that the company remains adaptable to future market changes. Shiseido's emphasis on sustainability and continuous improvement reflects a broader cultural value of planning and preparing for the long term, demonstrating how deeply ingrained cultural values can guide business strategies and operational practices.

Another eye-opening insight emerged from the concept of individualism vs. collectivism. This cultural dimension examines whether a society values personal achievements and autonomy or prioritizes group cohesion and loyalty (Nickerson, 2023). The Kiku-Masamune Brewery Museum, with its centuries-old tradition of sake brewing, vividly embodies collectivist principles. This collectivist culture is evident in the collaborative nature of the brewery's operations, where the focus is on teamwork, shared responsibility, and preserving the

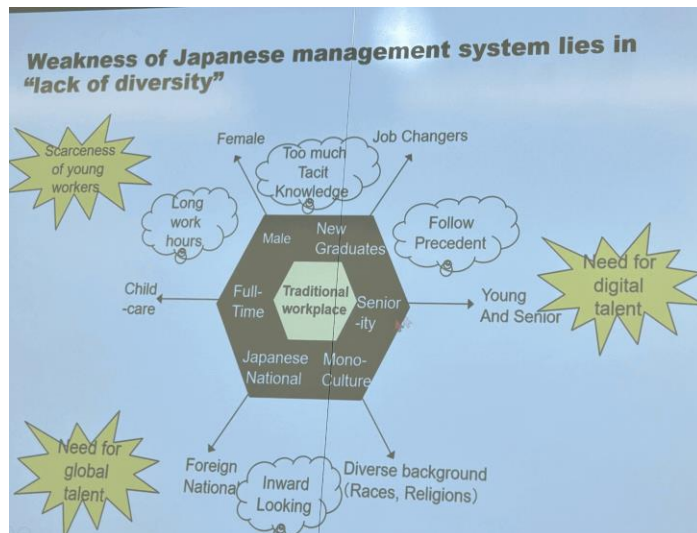


communal heritage of sake brewing. Each employee at Kiku-Masamune plays a vital role in maintaining the high standards of their product, and decisions are made with the consensus and well-being of the entire group in mind. This approach fosters a strong sense of loyalty and unity among the staff, who are collectively motivated by the shared goal of sustaining the brewery's legacy and ensuring its future success. This collectivist mindset also extends to the brewery's relationships with suppliers, customers, and the local community, creating a network of mutual support and long-term partnerships. By prioritizing group harmony and long-term relationships over individual achievements, Kiku-Masamune not only preserves its cultural heritage, but also builds a resilient business model that can adapt to changes and challenges. This experience underscored the importance of understanding and integrating cultural values like collectivism into business strategies, as it can lead to more sustainable and harmonious organizational growth.

Lastly, the lecture at Mukogawa Women's University provided profound insights into how the cultural dimension of femininity vs. masculinity influences business decision-making in Japan.



Hofstede's dimension of femininity vs. masculinity measures the degree to which a culture emphasizes cooperation, modesty, and quality of life vs. competitive success and achievement (Nickerson, 2023). Japan scores an exceptionally high 95 on masculinity, reflecting a cultural

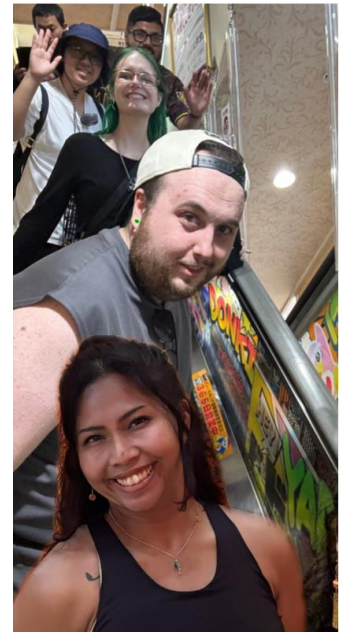


emphasis on competitiveness, achievement, and traditional gender roles (Nickerson, 2023). This focus has historically driven Japan's rapid industrial growth and economic success. However, the lecture highlighted that Japan's high masculinity score is now hindering its business practices and decision-making. The intense emphasis

on competition and traditional hierarchical structures has resulted in a lack of diversity and innovation in the workplace. As global markets evolve and other countries adopt more inclusive and collaborative management styles, Japan's rigid adherence to masculine values—among other factors—has led to a loss of competitive edge. The traditional Japanese management system often underutilizes diverse talents and perspectives, limiting creativity and adaptability. As I learned by the end of the lecture, to regain its competitive advantage, Japanese businesses need to adjust their workplace culture to incorporate more feminine values, such as fostering inclusivity, promoting work-life balance, and encouraging collaboration. By doing so, they can create a more dynamic and innovative business environment that is better equipped to respond to global market changes and diverse consumer needs. This shift would not only enhance Japan's competitiveness, but also lead to a more balanced and sustainable approach to business growth.

## Personal and Professional Transformations

Leaving the U.S. and immersing myself in a new culture during this trip brought about a significant transformation in my personal life. Before this trip, I often found myself leaning towards introversion, hesitant to step out of my comfort zone and engage with unfamiliar people or situations. However, being in a foreign country compelled me to push myself to be more open and extroverted. I realized the importance of actively engaging with people around me, which helped me build new relationships and friendships that I might have otherwise missed. For instance, initiating conversations with locals, participating in group activities, and embracing new cultural experiences not only



broadened my understanding of the world, but also enriched my personal connections. This shift in my behavior fostered a newfound confidence in my ability to adapt and connect with others, regardless of cultural or language barriers. As a result, I returned home with a more adventurous spirit and a proactive approach to social interactions, ready to seize opportunities and cultivate meaningful relationships. This transformation has not only enhanced my personal life, but has also equipped me with valuable interpersonal skills that will benefit my professional endeavors.

Another significant turning point in my personal development was embracing a more adventurous spirit. Before my in-country experience, I often preferred the safety of familiar routes and environments. However, being immersed in a new culture compelled me to take risks and seek out new experiences. This shift in mindset allowed me to fully engage with the world around me, from exploring hidden local gems to trying unfamiliar foods to navigating public transportation without a guide. Each challenge I faced—and subsequently overcame—boosted my confidence and sense of accomplishment. For instance, Tae and I decided to stay back later in Arashiyama to explore more of the city on our own. This decision required us to navigate the complex train system

by ourselves to reunite with our group later that evening. Initially, the thought of maneuvering through an unfamiliar transportation network in a foreign country was daunting. However, we took it as an opportunity to test our independence and problem-solving skills. Successfully finding our way back to the hotel gave me a profound sense of achievement and confidence. This experience taught me the value of taking risks and the rewards that come from tackling unexpected obstacles. By being more adventurous, I enriched my travel experience, as well as gained a greater sense of self-reliance and courage. This newfound adventurous spirit has continued to influence my daily life, encouraging me to seek out new experiences, face challenges head-on, and trust in my ability to navigate through uncertainties.

Lastly, I would say that our experience with our tour guide, Mr. Ishikawa, profoundly influenced my understanding of professionalism and how to uphold myself in the business world. Observing and interacting with professionals like Mr. Ishikawa provided invaluable lessons on the nuances of business etiquette and conduct. Mr. Ishikawa's approachability, punctuality, respectfulness, hospitality, and accommodation were exemplary, setting a high standard for professional behavior. His demeanor taught me the importance of being approachable, as it fosters open communication and collaboration within a team. Being punctual demonstrates respect for others' time and commitments, an essential aspect of building trust and reliability. Mr. Ishikawa's respectful and hospitable nature highlighted the significance of treating colleagues and clients with kindness and consideration, creating a positive and productive work environment. Additionally, his accommodating attitude showed me the value of flexibility and willingness to support others, which are crucial traits in maintaining strong professional relationships. These insights were transformational for me, as they equipped me with a deeper understanding of how to navigate the professional world with integrity and grace. Upon returning to the U.S., I found myself more confident in my professional interactions, striving to embody the qualities of professionalism I

observed during my time abroad. This experience has undeniably shaped my career aspirations and approach to business, ensuring that I carry these lessons with me throughout my professional journey.

### **Additional Insights and Meaningful Reflections**

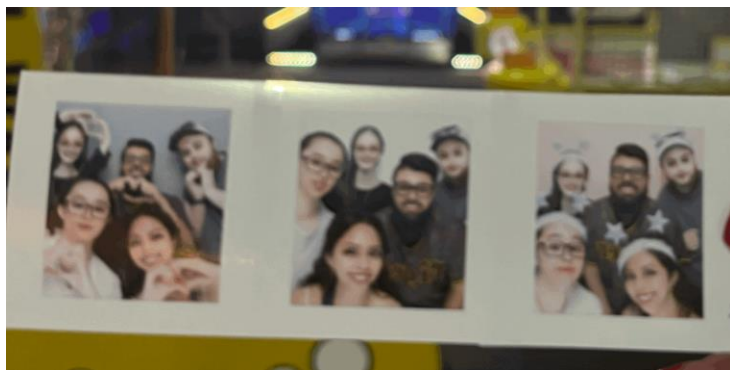
One of the most meaningful aspects of my in-country experience was the opportunity to visit a diverse range of sites, from places of worship to historical landmarks to manufacturing facilities. Each of these visits offered unique insights that deepened my understanding of cultural and business practices, ultimately enriching my appreciation for the SMU MBA program. For instance, visiting traditional manufacturing sites



allowed me to see firsthand the intricate craftsmanship and dedication to quality that defines many Japanese industries. This experience highlighted the importance of attention to detail and pride in one's work, values that I can apply to my own professional development. Additionally, exploring historical sites and places of worship provided a broader context for understanding cultural foundations that influence modern business practices in Japan. These visits underscored the interconnectedness of culture, history, and business, reinforcing the holistic approach to learning that the SMU MBA program advocates. By immersing myself in these varied environments, I not only gained a deeper appreciation for the cultural richness of Japan, but also saw how the principles taught in the MBA program can be applied in a global context. This cultural immersion has inspired me to approach both my personal and professional life with a more open and inquisitive mindset, eager to integrate diverse perspectives into my business acumen. The experience

solidified my belief in the value of a globally-oriented education, which the SMU MBA program so effectively provides, preparing me to navigate and succeed in an interconnected world.

Another impactful lesson learned was the beauty of community and the transformative impact of interpersonal connections. Engaging in conversations with individuals from diverse backgrounds, whether locals or fellow travelers, filled my heart with a sense of belonging and enrichment. Through these interactions, I discovered the universal truth that people change people, and every encounter has the potential to leave a lasting impact. The concept of *inafamaolek*—which emphasizes harmony and reciprocity in my CHamoru culture—resonated deeply with me as I witnessed firsthand the kindness and generosity of the people I met. This spirit of reciprocity transcended cultural boundaries, fostering a sense of mutual respect and understanding that enriched my learning journey. The photo that holds particular significance to me is one taken with my travel-mates during our excursion through Dotonbori. In it, we are laughing and making



memories, united by our shared experiences and curiosity about the world. This photo symbolizes the power of community in shaping our learning experiences, as well as the importance of fostering connections

that transcend geographical and cultural barriers. Through these meaningful interactions, I learned that the SMU MBA program's emphasis on collaboration and diversity is not just a theoretical concept, but a lived reality that enriches our personal and professional growth. By embracing the value of community and reciprocity, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of humanity and the transformative potential of global learning experiences.

Lastly, I deeply appreciated the opportunity for group dinners because they provided invaluable time for us to learn about each other and form meaningful relationships. These gatherings were more than just a chance to share a meal; they were moments of connection and camaraderie that strengthened our bond as a cohort. Unfortunately, I do not have a photo of all of us gathered around the table, but I can vividly recall the vibrant



exchanges and shared laughter that characterized these occasions. Through these dinners, I learned the importance of collaboration and teamwork, both essential components of the SMU MBA program. By fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect, these gatherings encouraged us to nurture genuine dialogue amongst one another and to support each other's growth. The connections formed during these dinners extended beyond the dining table, enriching our personal discussions and collaborative efforts. They reinforced the program's emphasis on teamwork and collaboration, as well as the value of building strong relationships with classmates and colleagues. As I look back on my journey, I am grateful for the opportunity to share these moments with my fellow SMU peers, and I am confident that the connections forged during our group dinners will continue to shape and support my professional growth long after the program has ended.

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## PART 2: QUICK THOUGHTS

**6. Did this international journey enhance your experience in the SMU MBA program (e.g., learning, connection to classwork, new insights, relationships with students/faculty, etc.)? Briefly explain.**

Yes, this international journey significantly enhanced my experience in the SMU MBA program by allowing me to apply knowledge from previous courses. For instance, during the tour



of the Shisedo Osaka Ibaraki Factory, I recalled the concept of vertical integration and understood how Shisedo uses this strategy to maintain quality control and support its environmental initiatives by reducing carbon emissions through in-house component production. Additionally, I connected lessons from Organizational Theory and Behavior (MBA601) by observing team dynamics and leadership styles in a different cultural context. Marketing Management (MBA622) concepts came to life as I saw how Japanese companies tailor their marketing strategies to local consumer preferences. The visit also reinforced key ideas from Operations Management (MBA631), such as efficient production processes and lean management practices. Lastly, the strategic insights gained from business leaders highlighted the practical application of frameworks learned in Strategy/Policy Analysis (MBA650). Ultimately, this trip enriched my academic understanding and broadened my perspective on international business practices.

**7. If a prospective MBA student contacted you about your Study Abroad experience in the SMU MBA program, what would you tell them (briefly)?**

I would enthusiastically share with a prospective MBA student about the transformative experience of studying abroad in the SMU MBA program. I'd highlight the unparalleled opportunities to immerse oneself in diverse cultures, gaining first hand insights into global business practices. From visiting renowned companies to engaging with local professionals, the program offers a unique blend of academic learning and real-world experiences. The connections forged with classmates and faculty members during this journey are invaluable, fostering a supportive network that extends beyond the classroom. Overall, the study abroad experience not only enhances academic learning, but also cultivates personal growth and prepares students for success in today's interconnected global economy.

**8. The SMU Vision Statement is: "Saint Martin's University strives for holistic development, collaborative exchange and an integrated approach to teaching and learning as an exemplary Catholic, Benedictine university." Briefly, what connections do you see in this Study Abroad which link to the SMU vision?**

I believe that the study abroad experience aligns seamlessly with the SMU vision statement, particularly in its emphasis on holistic development, collaborative exchange, and integrated learning. During the trip, I experienced holistic development by engaging with diverse cultures and expanding my global perspective. The collaborative exchange was evident as I interacted with international professionals and peers, sharing insights and building international relationships. The integrated approach to learning was embodied through real-world applications of classroom theories, such as understanding local marketing strategies and observing vertical integration at the Shiseido Osaka Ibaraki Factory. This immersive experience truly exemplifies SMU's commitment to creating well-rounded, globally-minded graduates.

**9. Should the SMU MBA program offer another trip to this location – Japan – in the future? Briefly explain.**

I believe the SMU MBA program should definitely offer another trip to Japan in the future. Japan provides a unique and enriching experience with its profound cultural differences from Western norms, offering a complete 360-degree perspective shift. The presence of sister schools in Japan fosters deeper academic and cultural exchanges, enhancing the learning experience. Additionally, Japan's blend of cutting-edge technology and traditional business practices offers invaluable insights into innovative management and operational strategies. This exposure not only broadens students' global perspectives, but also equips them with diverse skills and knowledge applicable in an increasingly interconnected world.

**10. How did you feel about the way this international experience was planned and executed? Was there anything you particularly appreciated?**

I thought the international experience was exceptionally well-planned and executed. Mr. Ishikawa was an outstanding guide, providing insightful commentary and facilitating meaningful interactions with local businesses and cultural sites. The itinerary was thoughtfully designed to balance educational tours with cultural immersion, allowing us to gain a comprehensive understanding of Japan's business environment and rich heritage. I particularly appreciated the attention to detail in logistics, which ensured smooth transitions between activities and maximized our learning opportunities. Overall, the meticulous planning and execution made the experience both enriching and enjoyable.

**11. If the SMU MBA program conducts another trip to this location, please offer your suggestions related to your experience. What itinerary items would you definitely keep? Is there anything you might change to enhance the experience?**

If the SMU MBA program conducts another trip to this location, I would recommend spending an entire day in Arashiyama. Other students noted that while the tour bus allowed us to see numerous sights in one day, the time limit significantly detracted from the experience. By focusing on just one location, we could immerse ourselves more fully, explore at a more leisurely pace, and truly appreciate all that the area has to offer. This approach would enhance the overall experience, allowing for deeper cultural engagement and a more meaningful connection to the location.

**PART 3: CONCLUSION**

**12. Briefly sum up your thoughts about your Study Abroad experience and the SMU MBA program.**



My study abroad experience was a transformative and enriching component of the SMU MBA program. It provided invaluable real-world insights, allowing me to apply classroom knowledge in a global context and observe diverse business practices first hand. The cultural immersion and interactions with local professionals deepened my understanding of international business dynamics, fostering both personal and professional growth. The carefully planned itinerary and the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with classmates and faculty further enhanced the experience. Overall, this journey not only broadened my global perspective, but also solidified the comprehensive and integrative approach to learning that the SMU MBA program champions.

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