Japan IFC 2016: What 37 HBS Students Learned From Entrepreneurs in Tohoku
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The Japan IFC (Immersive Field Course, formerly known as the Japan IXP), an HBS MBA elective course taught by Professor Hiro Takeuchi, was completed with another huge success this January. Since the program started as a response to the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11 2011, it has become one of the most popular elective courses. In fact, the Japan IFC is the longest running course of its kind, with 2016 marking its 5th consecutive year. This year’s theme was “Tohoku: The World’s Test Market for Authentic Entrepreneurship” and the program was held in Tokyo and Tohoku for 12 days.

37 second-year students from all over the world – US, Israel, Benin, Ghana, China, Czech Republic, Greece, Turkey, Korea, Egypt, UAE, Canada, France, Germany, Argentina, Singapore, Dominica, and Japan – participated in the program. During their stay in Japan, students were involved in three types of activities: 1) team-based consulting for eight companies in Tohoku; 2) full-group activities to learn and contribute to disaster-affected areas; and 3) immersion in modern and traditional Japan through unique cultural activities.

Nikkei newspaper spotlighted the Japan IFC in a video article titled “Harvard Finds Emergence of Entrepreneurship in Tohoku”.

Consulting to Project Partners in Tohoku
The students were divided into eight teams and each team worked with a specific project partner either in Miyagi or Fukushima to help partners grow or globalize their business. The eight project partners were either companies that started business after the

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1 Including those who have double citizenship with the U.S.
2011 disaster or companies that had long operated business in the region. These companies varied in size, history and industry – from a brand-new soap manufacturer with two staff members to a Japanese sake brewery with 350 years of history – but all had one thing in common: their motivation to help their communities through their business. After conducting some market research while being in Tokyo, teams spent three full days with their project partners in Tohoku, and culminated with a recommendation answering a key question for the project partner.

For example, one team worked with Fisherman Japan, an organization established by a group of young fishermen to revitalize the declining Japanese fishing industry. The team was asked to think about the strategy and organizational structure for a company that Fisherman Japan was planning to establish for their new business. In order to come up with valuable recommendations, the team started their day at 5AM, visiting a fish market, talking to local fishermen and having serious discussions with Fisherman Japan members, ending their day at 11PM. Yuki Tsuda, a leader of Fisherman Japan, said he was deeply impressed with the quality of the HBS students’ recommendation and would do their best to put the recommendation in practice. The students also gained valuable insights. Alex Santana of Team Fisherman Japan reflected, “At HBS we tend to focus on how to maximize profits. Working with Fisherman Japan reminded me of the importance of mission and made me rethink why we do business. The experience ignited my spirit.” The team’s leader, Haruumi Shiode from Japan, who will start his own business after HBS, said, “From Fisherman Japan members, I learned the importance of taking actions.”

The eight project partners included Akiu Winery (a newly built winery in the Akiu hot spring community), GRA (a strawberry farm in Yamamoto town), Hamaguri Café (a café built in the Hamaguri beach), Hyakusen Renma (a travel business aiming at increasing inbound tourism demand to Tohoku), Daishichi sake brewery (sake brewery in Fukushima with over 350 years of history), MORIUMIUS (a nature school built in Ogatsu town), Minami Sanriku Soap Factory (a soap manufacturer in Minami Sanriku), and Fisherman Japan.
Full-group Activities in Tohoku
Since the first program in 2012, Japan IFC has maintained a tradition of incorporating volunteer activities during the program. In the earlier years, the students did physical volunteer work such as helping farmers and fishermen restore damaged facilities. But as the affected areas were restored, the type of volunteer work has evolved. This year, for example, the students visited two high schools in Fukushima. The HBS students learned about how these resilient teenagers have overcome difficulties since the nuclear power plant accident and were inspired by those who have taken action to solve Fukushima’s problems. At the same time, the sessions with the HBS students opened the door to the world for these local high school students and changed how they thought about their life and future. Many high school students later described the interactions with the HBS students as “life-changing”.

In addition, the HBS students engaged in a wide range of group activities such as: accompanying “Yakult ladies” in Fukushima to understand the role played by these Yakult employees in strengthening the bonds in the community; visiting Onagawa for the fourth time, a town which was most severely affected by the tsunami but has been known for its rapid rebuilding; and visiting Obori Soma Yaki, a pottery community which was located right next to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and has since partly resumed operation in different locations. Like at the high schools, the HBS students did not just learn from the visits, but they also made their own contributions. For example, in Onagawa, facilitated by Professor Takeuchi, the students brainstormed ideas for the town’s new healthcare plan, and at Obori Soma Yaki, the students were divided into teams to come up with recommendations for the future of the pottery business. The local hosts were amazed at how quickly the HBS students understand their situations and challenges and come up with solutions only within a few hours. Takeshi Matsunaga of Obori Soma Yaki later recalled, “It was rather shocking to see
the quality of the recommendations by HBS students. I could not believe they came up with such high-quality recommendations only after spending a few hours with us. Hats off [to] HBS.”

Fukushima Seikei High School (Photo: Mary Knox Miller/HBS MBA Program)

Fukushima High School Cheering Squad (Photo: Mary Knox Miller/HBS MBA Program)
Cultural Activities in Tokyo
While they were in Tokyo, the students explored the city and enjoyed various cultural activities. They watched the regimented and arduous training of sumo wrestlers, made their own sushi, walked like models wearing kimono in the streets of Asakusa, got a taste of the samurai era, enjoyed the taste of the finest Japanese whiskey, visited unique cafes in Akihabara, were dazzled by the Robot Restaurant show, and learned Japanese history and art at museums. The students also met Tadashi Yanai, CEO of Fast Retailing and visited Yakult HQ.

HBS students in kimono (Photo: Mary Knox Miller/HBS MBA Program)

Reflection and Summary
On January 15, the final day of the Japan IFC 2016, each of the 37 students reflected on their most meaningful takeaway by selecting one photo which they thought best represented their Japan IFC experience and presenting their reflections to HBS alumni, friends and Ark Hills Club members. Below are some of the students’ comments about their experience in Japan.

“I thought the strong sense of community, the sense of oneness and selflessness are the reasons behind the rapid disaster recovery in Tohoku. At the same time, I learned from entrepreneurs who started business for community rebuilding that being selfless and helping others does not mean sacrificing oneself. I will take the privilege of being an HBS student and work for my continent in the future, which does not mean me being poor or sacrificing myself.” (Alice Agyiri, from Ghana)
“The greatest learning for me of this trip was through my interactions with our project partner. The founders’ stories were inspiring and brought to life the theory of “Wise Leader” that Professor Takeuchi had taught over the past semester.” (Sarah Nam, from Korea/US)

“At HBS, we talked a lot about having patience for profits. What I learned most about Japan is that there is intrinsic value placed on things outside just profit. There are definitely other factors that go into investment and business decisions not just for profit and that comes from mission-driven motives.” (William Strunk, from US)

Students Making Recommendations for Onagawa
(Photo: Mary Knox Miller/HBS MBA Program)

Students Accompanying Yakult lady visiting temporary houses in Fukushima
(Photo: Mary Knox Miller/HBS MBA Program)
What makes the Japan IFC special is how it connects Tohoku, one of the most underdeveloped yet emerging entrepreneurial areas, with HBS, an institution to educate global leaders. The Japan Research Center (JRC) has cultivated this connection in collaboration with many people in Tohoku, Tokyo and the school’s Global Experience Office (Yu-Ting Huang in particular) and has identified and sourced all project partners and developed all group-activities in Tohoku.

In addition, what makes Japan IFC even more special is the tradition of having young Japanese volunteers spend the entire two weeks with the HBS students that started in 2015. This year, there were nine volunteers, most of whom are college students. Volunteers were assigned to project teams and acted as translators, but quickly became HBS students’ best friends from Japan. Given that the IFC had eight project partners in eight different locations and that most of the partners and hosts do not speak English, without the help of these capable young people, Japan IFC would not have been possible.

Under the leadership of Dean Nitin Nohria, HBS has tried to rebalance “knowing”, “doing” and “being” in its education. We believe that Japan IFC has demonstrated one example of a program which encapsulates these qualities.