

DAY 1 | Ten Days in Bicol with University of Tsukuba Students

A Record of a Multicultural Collaborative Learning Program

Nine nationalities and diverse academic fields: students from three universities take on real challenges facing local communities

Arrival at Bicol International Airport at 5:30 a.m.



At 5:30 a.m., as dawn slowly broke and the town began to brighten, our program staff waited at Bicol International Airport in Albay, Philippines, for the University of Tsukuba students to arrive.

Their task was to identify challenges facing communities in Bicol and work with local students to develop possible solutions. A total of 50 students—25 from the University of Tsukuba, 15 from Bicol University, and 10 from Central Bicol State University of Agriculture (CBSUA)—would form teams across universities and nationalities and spend ten days preparing proposals for the region.

Two municipal mayors, university presidents, the head of a local agricultural cooperative, professors, and many students would welcome the students from Japan. Ten days of learning and thinking together about local communities were about to begin.

This was not an exercise in solving a problem assigned in a classroom. The students would begin by determining what the problem was. Their primary sources would be their own eyes and ears, and the words of the people who lived in the region. These firsthand encounters would become deeply memorable experiences.

The University of Tsukuba students arrived at Bicol International Airport while the sky was still dim. Although they had just completed a long journey, they looked with curiosity at the unfamiliar scenery passing outside the bus windows.

Twenty-Five Students from Nine Countries and Many Academic Fields



The 25 participants from the University of Tsukuba included 14 Japanese students and 11 international students from Kenya, Indonesia, Nepal, Romania, Nigeria, Mongolia, India, and Bangladesh. Together, they represented nine nationalities.

The group comprised 16 undergraduate, seven master's, and two doctoral students. Some studied materials science, engineering, information science, life and environmental sciences, or medicine; others focused on linguistics, international relations, education, physical education, or human sciences. Even when looking at the same community, they would not all notice the same things.

Their pre-program responses showed a wide range of specific interests: natural disasters and disaster preparedness, climate change, food security, agriculture and supply chains, local industry, the communication of disaster information, and relationships among residents.

What they shared was a desire to hear directly from local people. They wanted to encounter realities that cannot be understood through desk-based data alone and search for answers with peers from different cultural and academic backgrounds. This was not an overseas program for learning English; it was a practical setting for thinking about the region's future.

Participants	25 University of Tsukuba students
Nationalities	Nine countries (14 Japanese and 11 international students)
Academic levels	16 undergraduate, seven master's, and two doctoral students
Fields	Science and engineering, information science, life sciences, medicine and health, humanities, social sciences, education, and others

Where Natural Abundance and Disaster Risk Coexist



The program took place in the Bicol Region in southeastern Luzon, home to approximately 6.06 million people across six provinces. Its most prominent symbol is Mayon Volcano, which rises 2,462 meters above Albay. Known for its strikingly symmetrical cone, Mayon is also one of the Philippines' most active volcanoes.

Agriculture thrives in volcanic soil, while fisheries support livelihoods along the coast. The region also has tourism and traditional crafts. At the same time, typhoons, floods, landslides, and volcanic activity threaten crops, production, distribution, and daily life. Here, natural abundance and natural hazards exist side by side.

Rather than understanding the region only through statistics and documents, the students would examine its present realities by listening to people who had lived, worked, and faced disasters there.

From the Airport to the Accommodation: Experiencing Differences from Japan



For some participants, this was their first trip abroad. One unfamiliar scene after another appeared outside the bus windows on the way from the airport to their accommodation: goods being loaded through vehicle windows, jeepneys traveling through town with passengers leaning outward, and small roadside shops. Exclamations of surprise rose throughout the bus.

At the accommodation, the shower produced almost no water. The power went out. Rain arrived suddenly. The students also encountered an intensely sweet welcome drink in true Filipino style. They immediately began experiencing an environment quite different from Japan.

Some splashed about in the small pool, others visited a local market, and still others rested quietly in their rooms. Each began closing the distance between themselves and Bicol in their own way.

The important thing was not to stop at noticing differences. How were these ways of living and local systems shaped by nature, industry, history, and people's values? What could the students contribute? Forming questions from what they observed would lead into the learning ahead.



Only two thin streams of water came from the shower, and there was no hot water. In the bathroom, water was scooped with a dipper called a tabo and poured into the toilet. For the students from Japan, this must have been a startling experience.

Learning About Traditional Industry and a Region That Lives with a Volcano



After the midday orientation, the group first traveled to Sumlang Lake in Camalig. Beside the lake, with Mayon Volcano in view, the students watched a demonstration of traditional weaving with abaca fiber, a technique locally known as pag-abul.

Abaca is one of the Philippines' leading natural fibers and is used for rope, paper, textiles, and handicrafts. By observing not only finished products but also the process through which local people transform the raw material, the students encountered both Bicol's industry and its culture.

The next stop was Cagsawa Ruins in Daraga. The site preserves a church bell tower and other structural remains from the devastating 1814 eruption of Mayon Volcano. Now designated a National

Cultural Treasure, it symbolizes both Bicol's history and the experience of communities that have long lived alongside the volcano.

The students also visited the nearby National Museum of the Philippines – Bicol. Rather than simply viewing Mayon as scenery, they had an opportunity to learn how the region's natural environment, history, and people's lives are interconnected.

Interviewing Souvenir Shop Staff About the Impact of Volcanic Disasters



At Cagsawa Ruins, the students did more than tour the site; they also completed an interview task at local souvenir shops. Their theme was how Mayon's eruptions and other disasters had affected life and commerce in the community.

Approaching someone for the first time, asking questions in English, and listening closely to that person's experiences was not easy. Nevertheless, the students each attempted a conversation with the shop staff. These became their first interviews connecting knowledge from written materials with the lived experiences of local residents.

ATV Riding and a First-Night Dinner at Barisbis



After the interviews, the students rode ATVs at the foot of Mayon Volcano, moving their bodies and enjoying the dirt trails. The group photo taken afterward captured their liveliest moment of the day so far.

The day ended at Barisbis Filipino Restaurant in Camalig, a popular Filipino restaurant recommended by the local staff. Over their first dinner together, the group watched in surprise as an elaborate birthday song was performed in the restaurant.

From the early-morning airport arrival to traditional industry, volcanic history, interviews with local residents, and ATV riding, it had been a long day. As the students looked back on it, conversations among them gradually increased. The environment was entirely different from Japan and must have stirred many thoughts and emotions.

The following day, students from Bicol University would join them. CBSUA students would also enter the program, and activities in multicultural teams of 50 students would soon begin in earnest. What questions would grow from what the students had seen and heard on their first day? Their ten days of learning were only beginning to deepen.



DAY 2 | University of Tsukuba and Bicol University

Beginning Multicultural Collaborative Learning Through Cultural Exchange

From the Flag Ceremony to cultural exchange: eight mixed teams begin working together

A Morning at the BU Main Campus



On Day 2 of the program, the University of Tsukuba students visited the main campus of Bicol University (BU) in Legazpi City, Philippines. They joined faculty, staff, and students for the morning Flag Ceremony. Welcomed into an ordinary part of university life, students from the two universities met one another for the first time.

Representing PHLIGHT Inc., we expressed our gratitude for the welcome and spoke in English about what we hoped the participants would value throughout the program.

"The most important part of this program is for the students from both universities to connect, learn from each other, and grow together."

The students would learn about the region and its cultures while working across universities, nationalities, and academic disciplines to consider solutions to the real challenges facing Bicol. At the heart of these ten days was not simply receiving knowledge, but learning through human connection and thinking together.

From Introductions to Eight Teams



After the Flag Ceremony, every participant introduced themselves, and the University of Tsukuba and BU students formed eight mixed teams. Their first joint task was to choose a team name.

The names included Bicol Express, Team Magayon, Kapwa, Team Berde, Bigas Mug, and Kinang Spaghetti, drawing on Bicolano food culture and Filipino words. Choosing a name required asking what words meant, expressing personal preferences, and finding an answer everyone could accept. It was a

small task, but it became the teammates' first conversation as a group that would continue working together.

"I became friends with a BU student. This is the first friend I have made from another country."

— Keisuke Nagamine, University of Tsukuba

A BU student likewise reflected, "I learned that even when nationality and race differ, there is always a way to connect." Although the students from the two universities had only just met, brief conversations led to exchanging contact details and gradually building relationships.

Discovering Learning and Daily Life at BU Through a Campus Tour



A campus tour led by BU students followed. Its purpose was not simply to view the facilities. As they walked through classrooms and student spaces together, participants asked what their peers studied and how they normally spent their time at the university.

One University of Tsukuba student identified the BU campus tour as the day's most memorable experience. The tour and explanations that followed prompted the student to think about water. In

Japan, it had seemed natural for water to flow whenever a tap was turned. In Bicol, however, water pressure and supply conditions mean that water is not always freely available. Even the limited shower flow experienced the previous day became a concrete entry point for thinking about life in the region.

"In Japan, I took tap water for granted, but I realized how fortunate we are to have it."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

Language, Music, Dance, and Food: A Cultural Exchange

Prepared by BU



In the afternoon, the BU College of Education hosted a lecture and cultural exchange program focused on language and culture. In a lecture by Dr. Angela E. Lorenzana, students learned about English as it is used in the Philippines and the relationship between language and culture. Their reflections noted the natural blending of English and Tagalog in conversation and the use of the word *po* to express respect.

After the lecture, students in the Bachelor in Culture and the Arts Education program, guided by Dr. Analiza Pasano and Prof. Ma. Christine Joy Neric, presented a cultural performance featuring music and dance. Rather than a simple sequence of acts, it told a story about young people leaving to study

abroad, their families, and the distance they feel from their culture. The narrative resonated deeply with the participants.

"The story about family was truly wonderful. I learned that family bonds are very strong in the Philippines, and that people warmly welcome others and value the community."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

During Filipino games, students who had been watching were naturally drawn into the circle. When the singing and dancing began, University of Tsukuba students stood and joined in, and the venue filled with loud cheers.

"The Filipino dancers and singers were wonderful, and what stood out most was Augustine spontaneously starting to dance."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

The food presentation featured locally enjoyed snacks and dishes, including puto, rice cakes, suman, ibos, and pinangat. Language, traditions, music, performance, and food all came together as BU students shared their culture in their own words and forms of expression.

"I realized that despite cultural differences, love, joy, and hope are things we share."

— Abraham James E. Romero, Bicol University

No Barrier: The Change Visible After the Exchange



During the morning introductions, students approached one another while still thinking carefully about what to say in English. By the end of the cultural exchange, the scene had changed considerably. They sat together laughing, took photographs, and exchanged social media accounts. The boundaries between universities and nationalities had visibly begun to fade.

"I was overwhelmed by the tremendous energy. At the same time, I learned a great deal from the way Filipino participants took the initiative to open up to others. I think friendship and cultural exchange begin when we take action ourselves."

— Toshifumi Matsuda, University of Tsukuba

The expressions students used to describe people in the Philippines were "no barrier" and "more expressive." Of course, no country or people can be generalized from a single day's experience. Even so, the BU students' openness in expressing emotion and affection, and their lack of hesitation in approaching people they had just met, made a strong impression. Some participants also noticed rainbow flags, a familiar symbol of LGBTQ+ communities, and people speaking openly about sexual diversity.

"I learned that precisely because our cultures and values are so different, it is important to approach one another with respect."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

Welcome to the Philippines: The Questions About Culture Continue



The conversations continued even after the formal exchange ended. On the bus, one student heard that karaoke may be part of a funeral gathering and asked, "Why? Isn't that disrespectful?" A local student then explained local ways of seeing off the deceased and the custom of family and community members gathering and spending time together. When balut, a fertilized duck egg containing a developing embryo, came up, surprised voices asked, "Do people really eat that?"

During the homestay briefing, the group also discussed how to bathe when a running-water shower is not fully available. After the explanation, "No shower. But enough water," they were introduced to the tabo, a small dipper used to pour water over the body from a filled bucket. When the power suddenly went out in the middle of the discussion, a BU faculty member responded with a smiling remark.

"Welcome to the Philippines!"

— Dean Ros

They encountered unfamiliar customs and asked candid questions. Local students explained the background, and everyone laughed together. An important part of the program was not simply being taught the correct answer, but turning differences into conversation.

Finding Common Ground and Moving Toward the Next Stage of Learning



One participant reflected that looking for common ground together helped when becoming friends with many people from different backgrounds. Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna also believed that trust built through culture and language would provide a foundation for jointly creating practical solutions to local challenges such as disaster resilience.

"Cultural exchange is difficult, but it is also enjoyable."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

Students who had been strangers in the morning were joking, dancing together, and asking one another about differences in daily life and values by evening. On Day 2, the eight teams began to function not only as names, but as relationships among people. Building on the trust formed here, the students would now turn to the challenges facing communities in Bicol.



DAY 3 | From Cacao to Chocolate

Learning About Local Challenges at Production and Processing Sites

From a morning with host families to the MURAVAH Foundation: listening to farmers and thinking together as teams

Experiencing Filipino Family Life Through Homestays



On the morning of Day 3, we asked the assembled students, "How was your homestay?" Stories about meals and time with their host families came one after another.

"The food was delicious. I was a little concerned about the bedding, though, so I wore a mask while I slept."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

The host households included not only the families' children, but also nieces, nephews, and other relatives. Family life extended beyond parents and children, with relatives spending time together in close proximity. The students experienced the nature of Filipino extended families not through an explanation, but as part of everyday life.

Some students laughed along as a young child danced to American rap music. When they asked, "At what age can people drink alcohol?" they were reportedly told that age was not the deciding factor and that it depended on the family and parents. Cultural differences do not exist only in special lectures; they also appear in conversations around the table, in the ways families spend time, and in the music children listen to.

From Cacao to Chocolate at MURAVAH



The day's destination was the MURAVAH Foundation in Camalig, Albay. Working with farmers around Mayon Volcano, the foundation handles the process from cacao cultivation to chocolate production under the Mayon Gold brand. Its initiative connects improved farmer livelihoods, local employment, and biodiversity-conscious agriculture with chocolate as a marketable product.

In the morning, the students observed how harvested cacao is processed into chocolate. Beans are removed from cacao pods, fermented and dried, then roasted, ground, and molded. In the workshop, they saw the machinery operating and observed tempering up close—the process of controlling the chocolate's temperature to refine its texture and gloss.

"I was amazed to see chocolate making directly in front of me after previously seeing it only in videos. I was also impressed that post-harvest cacao processing is taking place in Albay."

— Jerby Josh Li. Saulon, Bicol University

The students also tasted raw cacao beans and chocolate at intermediate stages of processing. Learning about the labor and technical skill behind the product, rather than tasting only the finished chocolate, changed how they saw a single chocolate bar.

"I learned the entire process, from cultivating cacao to turning the chocolate into liquid form, cooling it, and completing the finished product."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

The Golden Girls: Local Employment Created Through Chocolate Making





The women producing chocolate in the workshop drew particular attention. MURAVAH creates stable work and income opportunities for local women, including single mothers. Some students were deeply impressed by the women affectionately known on site as the Golden Girls as they operated machinery and checked product quality.

"I was deeply impressed that the organization employs women in difficult circumstances and creates opportunities for them to grow. Agriculture and chocolate making were also contributing to women's empowerment."

— Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna, University of Tsukuba

MURAVAH produces more than chocolate. It buys cacao from farmers, processes it, and sells it as finished products. Along the way, it creates local employment and channels profits into education, housing, and support for farmers. The students learned how a social enterprise can design business activity and community support as a single reinforcing cycle.

"MURAVAH works with farmers, buys cacao at prices above the market rate, and handles processing and sales. I learned how this social enterprise creates change in the community."

— Wiliter Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

Listening Directly to Farmers at a Cacao Farm



In the afternoon, the students moved from the chocolate workshop to a cacao farm. Standing at the starting point of the processing chain they had observed that morning, they interviewed farmers while examining how the trees grew and bore fruit.

They heard about multiple challenges: pests and diseases; typhoons and volcanic disasters; shortages of materials and equipment; the insecurity faced by farmers who do not own their land; and younger generations moving away from agriculture. Planting cacao does not immediately create a stable livelihood. Sustaining production requires considering harvest volume, quality, purchasing prices, natural disasters, and the people who will carry the work forward, all at the same time.

"Farmers told us directly that pests and diseases, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions affect productivity. We also learned in the field about agroforestry that combines cacao with coconuts, bananas, and other crops."

— Wiliter Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

What would be needed for young people to choose farming as a career? Could tax incentives or insurance schemes provide support? Some teams extended their conversations with farmers into discussions of possible public policies.

"What stayed with me was talking with farmers about how to encourage young people to choose agriculture. Reconsidering the appeal of farming through direct experience may offer a starting point for solving the problem."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

Teams Share Their Findings, but Easy Answers Remain Elusive



After returning from the farm, each team shared the day's findings and presented them to the full group. Although everyone had heard the same explanations and visited the same farm, they focused on different issues: investment in technology, government support, farmer income, younger successors, women's employment, pest and disease control, and preparedness for natural disasters. Differences in expertise and experience emerged as different questions.

One issue discussed repeatedly was the challenge of both avoiding agricultural chemicals to preserve quality and brand value, and controlling losses from pests and diseases to secure adequate yields. Farmers want to continue environmentally responsible cultivation, but without a harvest, they cannot sustain their livelihoods. Rather than choosing one side, the students needed to consider farmer income, product value, the environment, and future production as a single interconnected problem.

"The trade-off between organic and non-organic production stood out to me. There is no single answer. We need to find production methods that protect people's livelihoods today while remaining viable during disasters and into the future."

— Shunsuke Sakata, University of Tsukuba

"If the problem of pests and diseases can be solved without agricultural chemicals, it may be possible to raise yields and improve farmers' lives. I felt that this is a challenge worth addressing."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

The students moved from observing local challenges as outsiders to understanding a reality in which multiple conditions conflict and formulating their own questions. The presentations brought out concrete, thoughtful ideas from each perspective. The PBL themes were gradually beginning to take shape.

Ending with Filipino-Style Team Building



After a day of intensive thought, the program ended with Filipino-style team building. The activity was musical chairs, known in the Philippines as Trip to Jerusalem. When a BTS song began, the students did not simply walk around the chairs; they started dancing to the rhythm.

The instant the music stopped, everyone rushed toward the chairs. When the momentum even sent chairs toppling over, the room erupted in laughter and cheers. For that moment, the entire venue came together across the University of Tsukuba and BU, nationalities, and teams.

"The moment the music stopped and everyone ran for the chairs—knocking some of them over—was the most memorable part of my day."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

From breakfast tables with host families to the chocolate workshop, the cacao farm, interviews with farmers, team presentations, and musical chairs, Day 3 brought the students into contact with both community life and local industry. The questions they identified would now lead into each team's proposals.



DAY 4 | Visiting Mountain Farmers and Exploring the Challenges Facing the Cacao Industry Through Their Voices

A day in the mountains of Guinobatan, visiting farmers and confronting the realities of local agriculture

More Conversation, More Smiles: The Morning of Day 4



Day 4 of the program began with a noticeable change. At the morning meeting point, students were naturally talking with one another across university and national boundaries. The reserve and nervousness seen on the first day had gradually faded, and both conversation and smiles had increased dramatically.

When asked about their homestays, the students happily replied, "We're getting used to it." They had adapted to power outages and to bathing with a tabo, a dipper used to scoop water from a filled bucket, and cheerfully shared stories from their respective host families.

One host family talked about religion for an hour while the power remained out. Another went out with the students for takoyaki. Yet another shared Red Horse, a Filipino beer. Although all of the students

were taking part in the same homestay program, each had accumulated a different set of experiences. Their growth was evident in the way they had begun to see differences in daily life not simply as sources of confusion, but as openings for conversation.

Building a Lasting Relationship from Guinobatan



That day, the group visited Barangay Batbat, a mountainous community in Guinobatan, Albay. Local stakeholders and farmers welcomed the students with a special program.

The Municipal Mayor of Guinobatan also attended and expressed gratitude to the farmers for welcoming the students. The mayor spoke of a hope that this exchange would become a step toward a strong and enduring relationship between Japan and the Philippines. The circle supporting the students' learning had expanded beyond the universities to include the community, farmers, and local government.

"The visit to the cacao farm was memorable, but I will also never forget being welcomed by the mayor. I felt honored to receive such a warm welcome from the community."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

Eight Teams Visit Eight Farming Families



In the morning, the students learned about a local cacao processing facility and the realities of production. After lunch, eight mixed teams each visited a different farming family. Some farms were only a few minutes away on foot, while others took about 30 minutes to reach. Several teams crossed steep slopes, unpaved roads, and suspension bridges along the way.

The students went deep into settlements that tourists would rarely visit and learned about the farmers' lives and work in the very places where they unfold. Only after climbing the slopes and speaking face to face with the farmers did the practical difficulties of growing cacao there, transporting the harvest, and bringing it to market become clear.

"What stayed with me was climbing a steep path to meet a farmer who manages a five-hectare farm. It was a difficult journey, but hearing directly about the circumstances behind it made the effort worthwhile."

— Participating student, Bicol University (anonymous)

"In a village I would never visit on an ordinary trip, I spoke with a farmer. I learned how natural disasters and inadequate infrastructure create difficulties for farmers in small communities."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

In-Depth Interviews Beginning with a Simple Question: What Challenges Do You Face?



The students asked about cacao cultivation, post-harvest processing, product development, and sales channels. They then conducted in-depth interviews to explore the challenges farmers face, including income, equipment, fertilizer, pests and diseases, education, and succession.

There was no single challenge. Farmers spoke about securing water, controlling pests and diseases, finding money for fertilizer and agricultural chemicals, limited processing expertise, and restricted sales channels. They also described the roads and transport needed to move harvests out of the mountains. The students saw that increasing production alone does not necessarily raise farmers' incomes.

"The most memorable part was meeting cacao farmers and asking them directly about the challenges they experience in cultivation. Only after understanding the problems can we begin to think about solutions."

— Participating student, Bicol University (anonymous)

"Water, pests, and disease are major problems in growing cacao organically. Farmers may want to adopt technology, but the required investment is a barrier. I felt that growth requires investment in technological improvements."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

Production Is Not Enough: If It Cannot Be Transported, It Cannot Be Sold



Many students focused on logistics. Where roads are inadequate, simply transporting harvested cacao or coconuts to market requires considerable time and expense. The issue is not only how much a farm can produce, but in what form the crop should be transported, how far it should travel, and where it should be processed. It became clear that without reviewing the entire value chain, it is difficult to improve either product competitiveness or farmers' incomes.

"Even with high production capacity, farmers' lives will not improve if poor road conditions prevent them from transporting their harvests. It made me realize that genuinely supporting agriculture also requires addressing infrastructure."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

"The high logistics costs stood out to me. We need to reconsider what form a product should take during transport and where processing should occur along the value chain, and then determine how to remain competitive in the target market."

— Toshifumi Matsuda, University of Tsukuba

At the same time, another question emerged: would paving the roads solve everything? Agriculture must become attractive work for younger generations; farmers need knowledge of processing and product development; and they must be able to meet companies' requirements for doing business. Infrastructure, people, technology, and access to markets cannot be considered separately.

The Work and the Lives Behind a Cup of Tablea



Through their interviews, the students learned how much manual labor goes into making tablea, the cacao tablets used for a beverage commonly enjoyed in the Philippines. Cacao must be grown from seed and then harvested, fermented, dried, and roasted through a series of labor-intensive steps. Yet this effort is not always adequately reflected in the price, and some farmers have little choice but to sell dried beans at low prices.

"Before tablea reaches the breakfast table, it passes through many stages, from seed and harvest to fermentation and roasting, and much of the work is done by hand. Learning this made every piece of chocolate feel special to me."

— Participating student, Bicol University (anonymous)

One team heard from a farmer who relies on cacao and coconuts for income. Pests and diseases reduce the harvest, agricultural chemicals are unaffordable, and the farm's location limits the number of customers even at its small shop. From the farmer's life, the students learned that it is not simply a matter of making a product and expecting it to sell: knowledge, financing, processing, mobility, and access to customers are all interconnected.

The Same Rural Community, Different Questions



Because the eight teams visited different farming families, they returned with different findings: government support for fertilizer was insufficient; organic and chemical fertilizers differed in efficiency; some farmers could not meet private companies' procurement requirements and were therefore limited to local markets; and older farmers continued producing to sustain both their livelihoods and their culture.

Does continuing to farm truly benefit the farmers themselves? Is a system supported by young people sustainable? Is road construction a fundamental solution? The students' perspectives expanded beyond proposals to solve the immediate inconveniences before them to encompass the underlying industry structure and ways of life.

The previous day, the students had visited a processing facility and a farm. On this day, they stepped further into the lives of individual producers. They began to see cacao production, processing, product development, and sales as one continuous line, asking where value is lost along the way and what limits farmers' choices. It was a day that brought each team's understanding of the issues into sharper focus as they worked toward their final proposals.



DAY 5 | Moving the Learning to CBSUA and Envisioning the Future at the Forefront of Agricultural Research

A day traveling from Guinobatan to the CBSUA Pili Campus and exploring the region's future through bamboo, taro, native crops, and stingless bees

The Final Morning of the Homestay and the Feeling of Wanting to Meet Again



On the morning of Day 5, the students left Guinobatan as the host families who had shared their homes for several days saw them off. Some shook hands, some embraced, and others waved again and again. Although the stay had been brief, reluctance to say goodbye was visible everywhere.

When they had first arrived, the students were sometimes surprised and unsettled by practices different from those in Japan: how water was used, power outages, living conditions, and the way families spent their time. Yet as they shared meals, helped with household chores, and continued talking even during blackouts, what stayed with them was not the differences but the warmth of the people who had welcomed them.

Among people with long experience in the Philippines, the emotional arc of a visit is sometimes described as three sets of tears: anxiety before arriving, uncertainty when encountering differences in daily life, and sadness when it is time to leave. The students may have experienced something similar. Their stay began with discovering unfamiliar ways of living and ended with a reluctance to let go of the connections they had formed. The homestay transformed the Philippines from a place viewed from the outside into a place where people important to them now lived.

"Everyone was polite. They ate everything we prepared, helped wash the dishes, and, above all, were genuinely delightful students to spend time with."

— Prof. Marinette Opeña, host family

"They willingly took part in our family's daily routine, learning about our culture while sharing their own. Even in a short time, welcoming them as members of our family became a valuable cultural exchange for us as well."

— Dr. Alma O. Satimbre, host family

For the host families, too, the homestay was not a one-way act of giving. They remembered being close in age and talking at length, and how the students expressed their preferences while remaining open to new experiences. Each host family came away with memories that belonged uniquely to them.

The CBSUA Pili Campus Beyond the Rural Landscape



The bus traveled through the peaceful countryside toward Pili in Camarines Sur. The group's next destination was Central Bicol State University of Agriculture, or CBSUA.

CBSUA traces its history to an agricultural school established in 1918. Today, the expansive Pili Campus combines education and research in agriculture and related technologies with a strong commitment to extension work that brings research outcomes to surrounding communities. The university seeks to build sustainable, future-ready communities through agriculture and industrial technology.

Agriculture and an Unexpected Connection to Japan at Carmel Agri-Learning Farm



On the way to the CBSUA Pili Campus, the students visited Carmel Agri-Learning Farm. The owner guiding the group mentioned that his grandfather was from Kumamoto, revealing an unexpected connection to Japan in the Philippine countryside. Although it was their first visit, this discovery opened a conversation and immediately made their time at the farm feel more personal.

The students walked through the farm's broad rice fields and cropland, observing fruit trees and other crops up close. They also visited the piggery and saw how crop cultivation and livestock raising

operated together within a single farm. It was an opportunity to step into the rural landscape they had previously seen only through the bus windows and hear directly from the people who worked there.

The students learned that when a typhoon or another disaster is forecast, farmers may harvest crops early to avoid damage. Early harvesting can reduce losses, but it may also affect crop size, quality, and selling price. Disaster preparedness is therefore directly connected to farm income and to the difficult decisions farmers make every day.

After the tour, the farm team served snacks featuring local flavors. Alongside bignay juice, made from fruit resembling tiny bunches of grapes, were taho, warm silken tofu with sweet syrup, and turon, banana wrapped in a spring-roll wrapper and fried. Everything was organically grown. The snacks were especially welcome after a walking tour, and helped the students appreciate how agriculture is connected not only to local food, but also to a culture of hospitality.

"I learned that farmers harvest early before a disaster to avoid losses. It showed me how closely community resilience, environmental conservation, and agriculture are connected."

— Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna, University of Tsukuba

A Warm Welcome from CBSUA Faculty and Staff



At CBSUA, the Vice President and many faculty and staff members welcomed the students. One after another, people involved in preparing the program came to greet the group. All of the participants were deeply grateful for the warm reception.

Students from CBSUA now joined those from the University of Tsukuba and Bicol University. For the CBSUA students, this was also an opportunity to engage with participants from a range of countries and cultural backgrounds. Despite the nervousness of a first meeting, new connections began with small conversations.

"Actually speaking with international students was one of the most unexpected events of my year. Both the deeper discussions and the casual exchanges became treasured memories of that first day."

— Participating student, CBSUA (anonymous)

On the way to lunch, the students saw CBSUA classes taking place in open-air rooms without walls, despite heat intense enough to leave everyone perspiring. These naturally ventilated learning spaces offered another glimpse into everyday life on campus.



Using Native Crops to Strengthen Local Industry, Disaster Preparedness, and Food Supply



After lunch at CBSUA Agriville, the students learned about initiatives using bamboo, taro, ube, and native crops to support local industry and the food supply. Bamboo can be made into furniture and household goods, and responsible resource management can create local livelihoods and strengthen resilience during disasters.

"Bamboo can become many different products and support local livelihoods. I learned that even with resources we rarely think about, it is important to understand where they come from and how to manage them properly."

— Generous L. Alloc, CBSUA

The taro session covered the use of its leaves as food, the development of products such as taro milk, and hygiene management. The students also learned that protecting locally distinctive crops and genetic resources, and expanding cultivation options, can make food production more resilient to environmental change and disasters.

"I learned that taro leaves are edible, bamboo products can create local jobs, and earthworms can be used to make organic fertilizer."

— Wiliter Chemutai Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

Between lectures, an icebreaker began, a familiar feature of programs in the Philippines. Everyone joined the music and games with an enthusiasm rarely seen at Japanese university events. Instructors and students laughed together, quickly closing the distance with the CBSUA students who had just joined the program.

How Stingless Bees Support Agriculture and the Ecosystem



Stingless bees made an especially strong impression on many students. After learning how the hives are managed, they tasted honey, pollen, and propolis fresh from the hive. Some were surprised by the complex, tangy flavor, which differs from honey commonly found in Japan.

"Unlike the honey I have eaten in Japan, stingless-bee honey had a slightly tangy flavor that reminded me of mitarashi sauce."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

"The pollen had a distinctive, bitter aftertaste. I also understood, because I saw them firsthand, that stingless bees are much smaller than I had imagined and that bamboo has a remarkable range of uses."

— Yuri Gabrielle A. Bona, CBSUA

Stingless bees do more than produce honey. They help pollinate crops such as mangoes and cucumbers, supporting both agricultural production and the wider ecosystem. Beekeeping may provide farmers with supplementary income, but it also requires a plant environment where bees can forage, an appropriate scale of operation, quality control, and products with flavors consumers enjoy. The topic called for considering environmental contribution and business viability at the same time.

"Stingless bees not only provide a source of income; they also support the environment through pollination. Guiding the apiary tour and explaining hive management to the University of Tsukuba students was a learning and exchange opportunity for me as well."

— Generous L. Aloc, CBSUA

"Tasting honey fresh from the hive was the most memorable experience for me. I learned that bees without stingers help pollination and contribute to higher agricultural productivity."

— Yuto Aihara, University of Tsukuba

Turning University Research into Practical Capacity for Communities



The students also learned about soil and vermicomposting. Bamboo, taro, native crops, stingless bees, and soil may appear to be separate research themes. Yet all are connected through the use of local resources to raise productivity, increase farmers' income, and prepare for disasters and environmental change.

"I learned that agricultural research is closely connected to community resilience and economic development. Supporting farmers and expanding agriculture to a commercial scale require multifaceted collaboration between university science and technology and government."

— Kaede Watanabe, University of Tsukuba

Participants also voiced an honest concern: the group needed to align its definitions and assumptions regarding the program's overarching themes of food supply chains and risk management. Precisely because students with varied areas of expertise were working together, confirming what they meant by the same terms would be essential as they developed their proposals.

After the campus tour, the students moved into on-campus accommodations. They later played sports and continued their conversations around campus. This was the first day that students from the University of Tsukuba, Bicol University, and CBSUA had finally gathered in one place. Beyond exchanging agricultural knowledge, they were beginning to build relationships as new friends and colleagues.

The homestay had introduced the students to local daily life; CBSUA showed them how research connects with practice in communities. Day 5 became an opportunity to consider how university knowledge and technology might respond to the issues uncovered through the fieldwork so far.



DAY 6 | Learning About the Future of Coastal and Agricultural Communities and Sharing an Evening with Friends from Three Universities

A day from CBSUA Calabanga to the Pili Campus, connecting coastal management, agricultural innovation, and cultural exchange

Thank You for Turning Your Attention to Our Community



On Day 6 of the program, the group left the CBSUA Pili Campus for the Calabanga Campus in Camarines Sur. Facing San Miguel Bay, this campus studies not only agriculture but also fisheries and the challenges confronting coastal communities.

Dr. Jeremy Nolloso welcomed the students at the opening program. They were about to learn about the livelihoods of people who live alongside the sea, communities with limited access to food, and a shortage of people to sustain local livelihoods. In powerful words, he expressed gratitude that a younger generation had taken an interest in the region's challenges and traveled from afar to learn about them.

"As the number of people able to support our community declines, I am truly grateful that young people like you have come here and turned your attention to the challenges we face."

— Dr. Jeremy Nolloso, CBSUA Calabanga

The welcome table featured local Filipino street foods: butsi, glutinous rice balls coated with sesame seeds; fried fish balls; and kutsinta, a chewy rice cake. Morning conversations began as everyone gathered around the food prepared by the CBSUA hosts.



The first lectures introduced two complementary initiatives. Dr. Agnes Faustino discussed efforts to protect the coastal resources of San Miguel Bay, while Prof. Niña Francia B. Bergonio presented the Neo-Normal AgVenture Project, which creates opportunities for young people to participate in agriculture. The San Miguel Bay Research and Innovation Center works with local governments, fishers, and community residents to support coastal management, protecting marine resources while sustaining local food supplies and employment. The AgVenture Project, meanwhile, links agriculture not only with production but also with processing, marketing, tourism, and technology. It encourages people to start small with the resources already at hand rather than waiting for substantial funding or perfect facilities. The students learned that cooperation among universities, government, businesses, and

residents is indispensable to the sustainable use of marine and agricultural resources and to building local industries in which younger generations can take initiative.

"Agricultural initiatives can begin even when not every resource or answer is in place. I learned that innovation in research, business, and energy, together with collaboration, can bring significant change for farmers."

— Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna, University of Tsukuba

"The lecture on agripreneurship in Calabanga offered valuable insights into how young people can be engaged in agriculture."

— Wiliter Chemutai Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

Experiencing Naga's Culture Through Performance and Dance



After the lectures came a cultural show by SAMBIT, a CBSUA student organization. The students performed narrative songs and dances inspired by festival traditions in and around Naga. The vivid costumes, focused expressions, and powerful performances immediately drew in the audience.

After watching the show, the visiting students tried Tinikling, a traditional Filipino dance. They had to read the rhythm of two bamboo poles as they opened and closed, stepping carefully to avoid being

caught. Initially hesitant, they learned from the CBSUA students and, one after another, entered the moving poles. Each successful attempt drew loud cheers from the audience.

"The cultural exchange was the most enjoyable and memorable part for me. I learned that agriculture is not only about growing crops for a livelihood; it also offers opportunities for innovation and development."

— Ashleigh Danielle Ladesma, Bicol University

"I felt that activities such as dance and games can connect people without relying on words."

— Yuto Aihara, University of Tsukuba



Quality and Consistent Supply: Requirements for Bringing Products to Market



After the cultural exchange, the students observed how pili nuts, one of Bicol's signature products, are processed and sold. Turning a raw material into a product and bringing it to market requires more than flavor and safety: quality must remain consistent, and the required quantity must be supplied reliably over time.

In overseas markets in particular, quality and consistency are prerequisites for doing business. Yet packaging and preservation technology are costly, and prioritizing exports can affect both domestic prices and local supply. Could a system be designed that raises added value while continuously returning profits to producers? The students considered the supply chain that extends beyond product development.

"I was impressed by the effort to ensure internationally competitive quality and sufficient export volume. International markets are important, but the system must also provide a continuous income to local farmers."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

Taro, Employment, and Using One Field in Two Ways



After returning to the Pili Campus, the students learned about Deloverges Farm's taro cultivation initiative and visited the agrivoltaics installation and the CBSUA Agriville Learning Site. They revisited the previous day's lectures from the perspective of business practice: processing food safely into marketable products and connecting cultivation technology to farmers' jobs and incomes.

Agrivoltaics places solar panels above farmland so that power generation and crop cultivation can share the same land. Crops grow beneath panels adjusted to an appropriate height and angle. The approach can combine land use, renewable energy, and new sources of farmer income, although questions remain about who will bear the installation and maintenance costs.

"The visit to CBSUA's agrivoltaics facility was the most memorable part for me. Universities in Bicol hold extensive knowledge, from taro cultivation to bay management. That knowledge needs to reach farmers through ongoing training."

— Wiliter Chemutai Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

"I was impressed by the renewable-energy system that positions angled solar panels above farmland while allowing crops to be grown underneath. Agriculture can become an

income-generating business when products are properly brought to market."

— Nancy Onger, University of Tsukuba

The lecture also introduced cooperation with TUPAD, the emergency employment assistance program of the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. Sustainable agriculture encompasses more than agricultural technology; it also means creating local work and income for people who have lost their jobs or are in vulnerable circumstances.

Fellowship Night: Forming One Circle Beyond Language



The day's climax was Fellowship Night. A photo booth resembling a simple purikura machine had been set up, and students used the props to take group photos again and again across universities and teams.

During the games, pairs took on the Paper Dance, standing together on a single sheet of paper. Each time the music stopped, the paper became smaller, and any player whose foot left the paper was eliminated. Some balanced on one leg, others carried partners on their backs, and a few even lifted one another into their arms. The venue filled with laughter and cheers.

"It was fun to watch everyone continue the Paper Dance by carrying one another or piling together. The final dance party also became my favorite memory of the day."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba

Team performances followed, with each group presenting a dance or song. Some students revealed talents they usually kept hidden, while others invited friends from different universities to join improvised

dances. Over an abundant Filipino meal, they looked back on a day spent learning, laughing, and dancing together.

"At Fellowship Night, I enjoyed my favorite foods, explained them to international students, and even shared talents that I usually keep hidden. It was the best possible way to close an important event."

— Generous Luistro Aloc, CBSUA

Because This Is a Culture We Are Proud Of



When a PHLIGHT staff member remarked, "We have never been welcomed this enthusiastically in Manila," a CBSUA professor replied with a laugh, but also with unmistakable pride.

"That should not be the case. This is our culture. Filipino hospitality is a culture we can proudly share with the world."

— CBSUA professor

Even for PHLIGHT staff who had visited many countries and regions, the welcome and hospitality at CBSUA were exceptionally warm. The food, lectures, cultural show, games, and words offered personally to each participant all conveyed the same message: we are happy you came.

A faculty member accompanying the students shared the following words about the program:

"I hope you know you offered a life-changing experience to so many."

— Accompanying faculty member

From the challenges facing San Miguel Bay to ways of making agriculture a career for young people, and from pili nut exports, taro, and solar power to an evening of cultural exchange, it was a day when students from different universities, nationalities, and academic fields learned and laughed together. The relationships formed here and the warmth they received at CBSUA will surely remain with them for years to come.



DAY 7 | Traveling 150 Kilometers to Gubat and Discovering the Local Language and Coastal Life

From saying goodbye to CBSUA to understanding the community at BU Gubat: a day of exchange and dialogue before the final presentations

Leaving CBSUA for Gubat



The morning still carried the afterglow of the previous night's Fellowship Night. The Japanese students began by teaching radio taiso, Japan's familiar calisthenics routine, to the Filipino students. Small moments of cultural exchange like this are also deeply important.

The students then left CBSUA early in the morning for their next destination, Gubat in Sorsogon Province, approximately 150 kilometers away.

CBSUA students came to see them off. It had only been the previous day that students from all three universities had finally gathered to learn, dance, and laugh together. Despite the short time they had shared, they were reluctant to part. They took photograph after photograph, waved, and said their goodbyes.

"What stays with me most is the hospitality we have received from everyone in the Philippines. At the same time, it made me reflect on how fortunate I am in the environment where I normally live."

— Toshifumi Matsuda, University of Tsukuba

Getting to Know Gubat, a Town Facing the Pacific Ocean



After the long journey, the group arrived at the Bicol University Gubat Campus. Following lunch, a program titled Community Development and Sustainable Development in Bicol began at 1:00 p.m.

Gubat is a town of approximately 61,000 people on the Pacific coast in eastern Sorsogon Province. Its roughly 11,100 hectares encompass 42 barangays, and agriculture and fisheries sustain local livelihoods. Even within the Bicol Region, the language differs from those used around Legazpi and Naga. Gubatnon, spoken in Gubat, is also called Bisakol because it combines features of Bikol and Bisaya.

The lecture introduced Gubat's population, land, culture, industries, and sustainable-development challenges. Because both the sea and farmland support the town, climate change, natural disasters, resource management, and local employment must be considered together.

"I learned about Gubat's culture and its beautiful language. I felt how important it is to engage with people from different cultures and embrace each experience wholeheartedly."

— Wiliter Chemutai Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

Different Languages and Cultures Within Bicol



After the academic talk, the program shifted to cultural exchange. Sara Em Buluran introduced the students to the Gubat Campus, the local community, and basic Gubatnon words and phrases. The students practiced the unfamiliar sounds aloud and then shared words from their own countries and regions.

"Learning words in Gubatnon stayed with me. I felt that celebrating and continuing to use a culture is also a way of preserving it."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

"I learned the phrase Magayonon ka, which means 'You are beautiful.' Speaking to someone in their own language is a good way to close the distance between you."

— Victor Overcomer Onyeka, University of Tsukuba

Student comments also reflected an awareness of how local people remained rooted in their communities while pursuing study and work. Encountering another culture does more than put one's own culture into perspective. For students studying far from home, it can also become a time to reconsider where they came from and what they have inherited.

"Seeing local people take pride in their culture and warmly welcome visitors made me realize that cultural exchange can bridge differences and provide a foundation for lasting collaboration."

— Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna, University of Tsukuba

Japanese Students Moved by an Enthusiastic Welcome



During the ceremony, merienda—an essential part of Filipino programs—was served. Even though everyone had eaten lunch soon after arriving, gatherings for exchange came with both meals and snacks. The students were beginning to understand that sharing food was itself part of welcoming people and starting conversations.

Once the student exchange began, BU Gubat students approached one after another and invited the visitors to take group photographs. They expressed their happiness openly, without reserve, even with people they had just met. This way of rapidly closing the distance between people was unlike anything the Japanese students ordinarily experienced in university life.

"Although we had only just met, the Gubat Campus students actively approached us and made us feel welcome. I was moved by how directly they expressed their happiness."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

Time by the Sea and an Evening at Little Siargao



After leaving the BU Gubat Campus, the students moved to a seaside villa overlooking the Pacific. As soon as they put down their luggage, many headed straight for the water. They played in the waves, took photographs on the beach, and spent the late afternoon together after the long journey and lectures.

In the evening, they visited the nearby Buenavista Tourism Hub. With its seaside atmosphere and lively rows of food establishments, the area is locally known as Little Siargao. The students explored the stalls and chose the dishes they wanted to try.

The tables filled with lechon, a whole roasted pig; dinuguan, a stew made with pork blood; sisig, finely chopped meat cooked on a sizzling plate; shawarma rice; and other dishes. Although some were surprised by the appearance or ingredients, they tasted foods enjoyed in local daily life. The night market's constant music and conversation also offered an experience of life in Gubat.

"We went to the beach during the day and tried local food from the stalls at night. The sisig was especially delicious, and experiencing the lively atmosphere deepened my understanding of the region's food culture and daily life."

— Kaede Watanabe, University of Tsukuba

"I enjoyed the market along the beach. I also sensed how much people in the Philippines love music."

— Yuto Aihara, University of Tsukuba

Beyond an Enjoyable Evening, the Final Presentations Awaited



Even after dinner by the sea, some teams gathered at the villa to continue preparing for Monday's final presentations. From the wealth of information they had gathered—farmers' voices, cacao production and processing, logistics, disasters, agricultural technology, and local employment—they discussed which problem to focus on and who their proposal should address.

"Creating a more refined presentation with members from different cultural backgrounds is difficult, but it is also an enjoyable experience."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba (anonymous)

How should they respond when opinions did not align? Could they support their teammates and move the discussion forward rather than having one person impose an answer? Before proposing solutions to local issues, the work of collaborating as a multicultural team was itself confronting the students with important questions.

From the warm farewell at CBSUA to Gubat's language and culture, exchanges with BU students, seaside food culture, and late-night team meetings, Day 7 brought together time for understanding the community and time for shaping the final proposals.



DAY 8 | Turning Field-Based Learning into Final Proposals

From teamwork in Sorsogon to a night of preparation in Guinobatan

A Morning That Began with the Sea



After the previous day's long journey and exchange program, the students awoke to a peaceful morning by the sea. Bright water stretched beyond the windows, and some students and faculty members were already swimming in the early morning.

"Swimming in the morning sea with Prof. Hana from Bicol University and a professor from CBSUA was the most memorable experience for me."

— Kriti Thapaliya, University of Tsukuba

The students enjoyed the short period of free time in their own ways. As departure approached, BU students called out to the group, checked the luggage and headcount, and helped ensure that everyone boarded the bus on time.

They enjoyed themselves fully when it was time to relax, and paid attention to those around them when responsibility was required. The sense of responsibility shown by the BU students who had supported the program was evident again that morning.

A Day Devoted to Developing the Final Proposals



The main focus of Day 8 was preparation for the final presentations scheduled for the following day. Although some looked a little sleepy, the students divided into eight teams and organized the notes, photographs, and interview findings they had gathered.

What problems had farmers and business operators described? What factors lay behind them? Who should each proposal address, and what solution should it offer? The teams began the work of connecting community voices with feasibility rather than simply listing what they had seen and heard.

They opened their computers, researched the information they needed, and discussed the structure of their slides and the division of presentation roles. For members with different cultures, academic fields, and first languages to create one proposal, they had to express their ideas clearly and confirm one another's intentions.

"Preparing the presentation taught me the importance of teamwork and clear communication."

— Kaede Watanabe, University of Tsukuba

Some students reflected that they had been unable to express their ideas fully in English and therefore could not contribute enough to the discussion. That frustration led to a concrete goal: to develop not only language ability, but also the capacity to build agreement with people from different backgrounds.

"I could not communicate my argument in English and was unable to participate effectively in the discussion. I want to study English so that I can discuss ideas freely."

— Yuto Aihara, University of Tsukuba

Seeing Another Side of Daily Life at SM City Sorsogon



The students visited SM City Sorsogon, a large commercial complex in Sorsogon City. After traveling through rural communities, universities, and coastal areas, the organized retail spaces and many restaurants in the mall offered another place to observe local life. Stores such as Starbucks were among the tenants, and the students saw the everyday routines of people shopping and dining there.

Understanding life in the Philippines requires seeing the region through more than one setting. Farmers' lives, daily routines in host families, and urban commercial spaces where young people gather all form part of the same regional society.

"Visiting the local shopping mall and preparing our presentation with my teammates stayed with me. At the mall, I could observe the daily lives of local people, which broadened my perspective."

— Kaede Watanabe, University of Tsukuba

"Everything looked different from Japan, from the traffic lanes to the buildings in town. I learned that the world and assumptions I know are by no means universal."

— Yoshiko Mizuno, University of Tsukuba

Shortly after 2:00 p.m., the students left Sorsogon and headed back to Guinobatan, Albay, where the final presentations would take place the next day.

Understanding Regional Diversity Through Changing Accommodations



That night's accommodation was Ito's in Guinobatan. Students arrived smiling, and one remarked, "The standard has been going up step by step." Although the final presentations were still ahead, their expressions conveyed the fulfillment of having engaged fully with the program so far.

In this program, the accommodation itself was considered part of understanding the region. During the first half, students stayed with host families and in settings close to local communities, experiencing the daily lives of students and families in the area—though these represented the comparatively comfortable circumstances of households able to send children to university. Later, they also experienced higher-quality accommodation and commercial services available in the region, such as those used that day. The intention was not to treat either setting alone as the reality of the Philippines, but to recognize that different living environments and choices coexist within the same region.

What mattered was not deciding from the outside what everyday life in the Philippines should mean. It was approaching the lives of different people, listening to them, and updating the images the students had previously held.

Preparation Continues Past Midnight

After dinner, work continued in each team's room. Some refined the slides, others checked data, and others rehearsed the presentation script together. They were transforming what they had felt during the field research into proposals that could be communicated to an audience within the limited presentation time.

With limited time and members differing in academic expertise, culture, and English proficiency, opinions sometimes collided as teams worked toward conclusions.

"We had disagreements within the team while preparing the presentation. I was frustrated that I could not respond in English, and I realized that I need to study more."

— Toshifumi Matsuda, University of Tsukuba

The value of this experience cannot be measured only by whether the students were able to speak English. They learned, under genuine pressure, how to communicate their own ideas, clarify another person's argument, and build agreement when opinions differ—the capabilities required for multicultural collaboration.

Day 8 did not involve a succession of new destinations. Yet it was one of the program's most important days: a time to reflect on the experiences so far and put into words what the students had learned and what they would propose. A day that began by the sea ended in the quiet night of Guinobatan, where the students continued preparing for the final presentations until late.



DAYS 9–10 | Turning Field-Based Learning into Proposals and Returning Home

Learning at APAO, final presentations by eight teams, and the conclusion of the ten-day program

DAY 9 | Learning About the Systems That Support Agriculture



On the morning of the final presentations, the students visited the Albay Provincial Agricultural Office (APAO), the agency responsible for agricultural administration and technical support within the provincial government. Through farmer training, food security initiatives, enterprise development, and the dissemination of agricultural technology, APAO supports both producers and regional industries. It is an essential public institution for understanding the food supply chain.

A welcome address by the provincial governor had originally been planned, but the visit was canceled due to a last-minute change. At Philippine ceremonies, it is often important to begin after the guest of honor has arrived, so the group waited for some time. The delay itself became an experience of how proceedings may unfold differently in another society.

School events and public ceremonies in the Philippines generally begin with an Invocation or Opening Prayer, followed by the Philippine national anthem and words of welcome. On this day, the power suddenly failed just as the prayer began. With the sound system no longer working, the participants sang the national anthem a cappella.

Rather than simply wait for the power to return, the organizers changed the sequence on the spot and guided the participants on a facility tour. Moving forward with what could be done even when events did not follow the plan demonstrated a characteristically Filipino flexibility.

Beekeeping, Pili, Cacao, and Dairy Operations



During the facility tour, the students visited APAO's Bee Farm, Dairy Barn, Pili Processing, and Cacao Processing facilities. Daryl John O. Buenconsejo, OIC Provincial Agriculturist, explained the province's agricultural programs and the role of each facility.

In the stingless-bee apiary, the students learned how coconut shells can be used as hives, examined purpose-built hive boxes, observed honey harvesting, and studied methods of dividing colonies to increase their number. Pollination also affects the growth of surrounding crops, giving beekeeping the potential not only to provide supplementary income for farmers, but also to support the ecosystem and local agriculture.

"I learned that stingless-bee keeping and coconut farming are connected both ecologically and economically. Combining readily available resources with environmentally responsible methods can

simultaneously improve rural income, the environment, and community resilience."

— Ozuzu Augustine Ikenna, University of Tsukuba

"The APAO tour and the proposal presentations stayed with me. I learned about the province's various agricultural programs, including beekeeping and pili and cacao processing."

— Participating student, Bicol University (anonymous)

Connecting Agriculture with Solar Power



After the facility tour, Engr. Jilbert Novelero, owner of NoveLight Solar Services and an instructor in engineering and agriculture at Tabaco College, delivered a lecture on the fundamentals of solar power, common misconceptions, and safe installation practices. As they handled panels and wiring, the students considered how renewable energy could be used in areas where power infrastructure is insufficient.

"Through the presentation on rice farming, I learned how solar-powered irrigation could be improved to help farmers secure water even during El Niño periods."

— Wiliter Chemutai Momanyi, University of Tsukuba

Electricity supports many stages of the food supply chain, including irrigation, drying, refrigeration, processing, and communication. The lecture also connected with the crop-dryer proposal discussed the previous day, adding a perspective that treated energy as part of the agricultural challenge.

Eight Teams Present Their Proposals for the Region



In the afternoon, the students moved to BU Guinobatan for the final presentations. Dean Dr. Roscefe B. Dy delivered the opening remarks. Following introductions of the judges and an explanation of the evaluation criteria, all eight teams began presenting their research proposals at 2:00 p.m.

The themes varied widely: improving crop productivity; developing new products from regional specialties; reducing food loss and labor burdens through better transport networks; agricultural infrastructure powered by solar energy; and farming systems that use AI and emerging knowledge. Every proposal reflected voices heard directly from farmers, processors, universities, and government agencies.

"Every team demonstrated creativity and ingenuity. We had also identified transportation as an important issue for farmers, so I was pleased that the transportation proposal was selected. I hope it will truly be implemented in the future and enable farmers to move their crops safely and efficiently."

— Kirit Thapaliya, University of Tsukuba

"Presenting our proposal and what we had experienced in the Philippines before an audience was the most memorable part for me. I also learned from the issues other teams identified in the field

and the ways they understood them."

— Chowdhury Abdulla Nasir, University of Tsukuba



The proposal selected for outstanding recognition was Kablecacao, which focused on the challenge of transporting agricultural products. The team devised a way to move harvested crops safely and efficiently, treating the full journey from production to the point of need as a supply chain.

When asked how the idea for a cable car had emerged, the team replied:

"The cable car on Mount Tsukuba came to mind."

The moment when Tsukuba and Bicol connected in this way captured the essence of the program.

What Real Experience Made Possible



After the presentations, certificates were awarded and student representatives and program stakeholders shared messages.

"To be honest, I really struggled with the shower and toilet. On the first day, I spent about 20 minutes in the bathroom because I did not know what to do. Even so, I want to come back to Bicol."

— Participating student, University of Tsukuba

"We may not have sufficient electricity, Wi-Fi, or infrastructure here. But we do have hospitality, and that is something we are proud of."

— Filipino faculty member participating in the program

Not every proposal concerning agricultural technology or logistics could be implemented immediately. Yet the program created students who had spent time in the region and begun to consider local difficulties as their own. That is a firm foundation for future collaboration.

We had watched the students, initially uncertain on the first day, gradually talk more and smile more. Surface-level understanding is not enough when considering social impact.

To genuinely want to solve a problem, people need Real Experience: meeting others and coming into contact with their lives. The students of the University of Tsukuba, Bicol University, and CBSUA are the next generation of leaders. The fact that they learned across universities and nationalities, shared knowledge, cultures, and aspirations, and formed strong relationships was itself an important social impact created by this program.

DAY 10 | A Farewell Morning at the Airport



On the day of departure, BU students came to the airport to see the group off. Ten days earlier, the students had not known what to say and had kept a little distance from one another. By the final morning, they were taking photographs, reluctant to part, and promising to meet again.

It was also September 1, the beginning of the Christmas season known as the Ber months. The name refers to September, October, November, and December—the four month names that end in ber.

With Christmas songs playing at an airport where, to Japanese ears, they seemed far too early, the students boarded their flight to Japan.

Epilogue: Ten Days Connecting Communities and Universities

The initiative was shared not only with participating students, but also with the wider community. The Albay Provincial Government's official communications covered the agricultural and sustainability exchange at APAO, including visits to the Bee Farm, Pili and Cacao Facility, and Dairy Box enterprise, as well as the educational partnership among the University of Tsukuba, Bicol University, and PHLIGHT. Bicol University and CBSUA also reported on the program through their official channels.



For ten days, the University of Tsukuba, Bicol University, CBSUA, and PHLIGHT worked together as Japanese and Filipino students considered the region's agriculture, food security, industries, and sustainability. The program did more than create opportunities for student learning. It connected universities with one another, Japan with the Philippines, and the next generation of leaders with local communities.

The proposals should not end with a single presentation. The next question is how they can continue to be examined with community members and developed into feasible forms. Let us carry the relationships created over these ten days into future learning and collaboration.