

## **U.S.-JAPAN COLLEGIATE STUDENT EXCHANGES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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### **Introduction**

Japan and the United States are each other's principal partners in international trade and investment, economic policy coordination, technology development, military diplomacy, and many other areas. The eventual professional career of university students in Japan is likely to involve working with Americans, directly or indirectly.

Moreover, when Japanese nationals participate in an international conference, trade fair, music concert, sports tournament, dinner party, and the like in Brazil, China, Egypt, Italy, Russia, or any other country, they must communicate in English, regardless of whether they like the language. In addition, they must interact comfortably with people of a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Aspiring university students in Japan are aware of these facts. They wish to develop and polish the necessary skills through the experience of living and studying in the U.S. The best way to realize their wish would be for universities in Japan to establish student exchange programs with their counterparts in the United States. Such programs would provide Japanese students with opportunities to study and interact with Americans, as well as other internationals, in an efficient and effective manner. In addition, they would reduce the paperwork and time required for processing application and admission requirements. They would also reduce the cost of participation through the common provision to waive tuition and fee payments for exchange students.

Unfortunately, the supply of such student exchange programs is relatively limited, compared to the demand. These exchanges between Japanese and American institutions are not developed as extensively and thoroughly as leaders in both countries, particularly in Japan, have envisioned for many years. Many aspiring students must choose alternative avenues for their personal and professional development, such as attending English-conversation schools in Japan and participating in short-term sightseeing or experiential trips to the U.S. This paper explores why student exchange programs between Japanese and American institutions of higher education are underdeveloped, and suggests remedial measures.

**Background**

In 2005, there were 726 institutions in Japan that offered at least four years of higher education. Of the total, 553 were private, eighty-seven were “national,” and eighty-six were “public” (meaning municipal or prefectural).<sup>1</sup> They are called “daigaku,” which is typically translated into English as “university” (instead of “college”). In a strict legal sense, “national universities” ceased to exist in 2004, as they became “dokuritsu gyousei hojin” [independent administration university corporations] and gained substantial autonomy from the central government, even though they remained heavily dependent on national financing. In this paper, we will continue the use of the term “national,” although “formerly national” would be more accurate.

If these 726 universities are ranked in terms of academic background of students and faculty (as measured by entrance examination scores and by research/publication records, respectively), two percent, or no more than fifteen, of the total may be classified as “Very Prestigious Institutions” (VPI’s). This group is led by national universities, such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, but includes a few outstanding private institutions, such as Waseda, Keio, and Jochi. Their students and faculty are talented. The VPI’s have been distinguished since the pre-WWII period. They have few problems in developing student exchange programs with foreign institutions on their terms, because foreign students would be willing to accommodate any inconvenience for the opportunity to study at such name institutions.

The next thirty percent from the top, or about 220, may be classified as Superior Institutions (SI’s). All national universities which are not counted in the VPI group belong to this category; moreover, they all probably belong to the top 100. Most municipal and prefectural universities are in the SI group also. Approximately fifty private universities may be in the group.

A good proportion of the students at SI’s possess English language proficiency (as measured by TOEFL scores) that is sufficient or nearly sufficient for studying at universities in the U.S. A good proportion of their faculty members are also capable of offering courses in English. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, “Gakko Kihon Chosa, Shitei Touke 13,” 2007 ([http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/08010901/002/001/001.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/08010901/002/001/001.htm)).

SI's possess a solid potential to develop and sustain gainful student exchange partnerships with American institutions of higher education.

Some universities (no more than fifteen) in the SI group, exemplified by Kansai Gaidai University, have successfully developed excellent student exchange programs since the end of WWII, particularly over the last thirty years. They may be called "Super SI's" or "SSI's." More reference will be made to them shortly. Some others (no more than another thirty) have made plausible progress toward the goal over the last ten years.

Deplorably, a large majority of SI's still appear to be either very slow or stagnant in the development of viable student exchange programs. The situation is frustrating, because SI's, particularly national and public universities, are expected to produce eventual leaders in Japan and possess talented students and faculty, as well as substantial financial resources, for successful international exchange. Moreover, they are supposed to be a role model for other universities.

The next forty percent, or about 300 of the total, almost all private, may be classified as "Average Institutions" (AI's). They do have some talented students in the present context, but the proportion is rather small. These institutions have a long way to go for signing student exchange agreements with American institutions, primarily because their students' English language proficiency is low. They would probably be better off if they supported those talented students studying abroad individually and provide the rest with opportunities for short-term experience trips and language training in the U.S.

#### **Causes and Solutions of the Underdevelopment: Japanese Side**

The most fundamental cause of the underdevelopment of viable Japan-U.S. collegiate student exchange programs is institutional bureaucracy. The term in the present context refers to the rigidity, conservatism, and arrogance that is prevalent at superior institutions (SI's), particularly national universities that are pace-setters within the category.

These institutions tend to faithfully follow guidelines set by the central government for years, even after they become antiquated and unpractical. For example, they have a dichotomy between administrators and academics, with little interchange. They use a job rotation system for administrative personnel. They have independent and rival-minded "gakubu," namely "colleges" or "schools" in the United States and "faculties" in Europe. They are inward-looking and very slow to make changes.

These institutions have tended to regard their acceptance of international students as a favor to these students and a contribution to the world community. They are apt to consider international students as those who are eager to study at their proud institution. Accordingly, they reason that foreign students, when they apply for admission, must have acquired sufficient Japanese language proficiency to read rules and regulations, fill out application forms, understand class lectures, write reports, and take tests in Japanese.

As a corollary, these institutions do not feel pressured to make themselves accessible and attractive to potential exchange students from English-speaking countries. Specifically, they take a position, consciously or unconsciously, that they do not need to provide much admission information in languages other than Japanese, to staff the international student office with English-competent people, to be concerned with conflicts with foreign institutions in the academic calendar, and to offer courses in English. At such institutions, understandably, the number of students from the United States is negligible. An overwhelming majority are from East Asia, particularly China, as they have an advantage in acquiring Japanese language proficiency.<sup>2</sup>

It should be added that at such universities, various “gakubu” (i.e., colleges) tend to regard each other as rivals or competitors in the development of international education and exchanges. They tend to think of exchanging students in their own discipline with equivalent students at foreign institutions. Such a practice reduces the scope, and therefore the possibility, of exchange.

However, some private universities and a few national universities in the “superior” category have been very successful in developing international student exchange programs with universities all over the world, including the United States. For example, Kansai Gaidai University, a super-successful case, has fostered student exchange programs with nearly 100 colleges and universities in the U.S. alone. An analysis of their attitude and practice should provide hints and clues to other universities that are slow or stagnant in the development of student exchanges.

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<sup>2</sup> Japan Student Services Organization, “Gaikoku-jin Ryugaku Gakusei Zaiseki Jokyō Chosa,” 2007 ([http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl\\_student/data07.html](http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl_student/data07.html)).

Philosophically, SSI's regard international exchanges primarily as their service to their own (Japanese) students, instead of as a service to foreign students and as a contribution to the world community. Because they are concerned with their students' career training, these universities want to provide the students with opportunities to learn foreign languages and cultures through studying abroad. It follows that they would develop and promote student exchange partnerships with American and other institutions. In order to provide opportunities to as many of their qualified students as possible, they try to make themselves appealing to foreign institutions and attract as many good-quality incoming students as possible. Their main principles of operation include:

**1. Integrated International Student Exchange Office with English-Competent Staff.**

There must be an integrated international exchange office supported by all divisions of the institution, with one or more staff members versed in written and oral English. The office must be able to work closely with various departments and faculties within the university. It must be able to respond effectively to e-mail and telephone inquiries in English. There must be basic informational materials written in English regarding such matters as admission requirements, application procedures, academic calendars, and course descriptions. This list sounds like common sense that is not worth mentioning, yet many SI's, which have necessary human, financial, and other resources, cannot prepare the basics, as they are a prisoner of institutional bureaucracy.

**2. Offering a Minimum Set of Courses in English.**

Typical university students in the United States who are interested in studying in Japan have taken zero to two years of Japanese language courses. They do not have a sufficient language background to enroll in regular courses at Japanese universities intended for Japanese students and taught in Japanese. Moreover, they would like to study in Japan just for a semester. To make themselves attractive to American students who would come to their campus through the exchange program, Japanese institutions should offer beginning, intermediate, and advanced Japanese language courses. Such courses can be taught partly or mostly in Japanese as the instructor feels appropriate. In addition, they must offer at least several courses about Japan in English (e.g., history, arts, religion and philosophy, educational system, government

and politics, economic structure, and business management) to satisfy the exchange students' non-language interests.

### **3. Synchronization of Academic Calendar**

The typical academic calendar of universities in the U.S. is such that their fall semester starts in late August or early September and ends in December, and their spring semester starts in January and ends in May. In addition, many summer session courses are offered from mid-May through mid-August. Not only classes, but also financial aid, housing, and other arrangements are based on these markers. On the other hand, the typical academic calendar of Japanese universities is such that the fall term ("Second Term," more precisely) starts in early October and ends in early March, and the spring term ("First Term") starts in April and ends in July/August. Unless they are specialized in a Japanese-focused field of study, most American students would prefer a semester's experience in Japan. If they attend a typical Japanese university for a term, they must give up two semesters of study at home. Moreover, they must face inconveniences in making arrangements for loans, grants, housing, and other arrangements. Other things being equal, American students favor those Japanese universities which have made their academic calendar, at least in the international division, comparable with North American standards. They would seek out a Japanese university with little calendar conflict (e.g., Kansai Gaidai, Nagoya Gakuin, Nanzan, and Tsukuba Universities). If they fail, they may elect to study elsewhere (e.g., Europe) or give up the plan of studying abroad altogether. It may be added that non-Japanese universities in Asia that are successful in developing student exchange programs with North American institutions, such as Yonsei University in South Korea, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Bangkok University in Thailand, have compatible academic calendars.

### **Causes and Solutions of the Underdevelopment in the United States**

The United States is, arguably, the center of the world for contemporary civilization, in terms of political, economic, educational, technological, military, and other developments. Moreover, American English is spoken everywhere as the international language. Furthermore, to Americans, Japan is just one of the ten or fifteen most important countries. Thus, there are few built-in incentives and pressure for average American college students to learn Japanese language and culture.

Nevertheless, given the above condition, it is also true that global education is gaining strength at all levels of education as a background needed for a well-rounded citizen, and that interest in studying abroad has become increasingly popular not only among university students but even among college-bound high school students. While there are not many collegiate students who seek professional competence in Japanese language and culture, there are many students who would like to have a fair knowledge and understanding of Japan.

It would be nice for such students to study at a Japanese university for a semester or two. Student exchange programs would be an excellent vehicle. To provide more opportunities to students, American universities need to make a stronger effort to receive more exchange students from Japan. From this perspective, the following considerations are important.

**1. ESL Language Institute as an Internal Unit**

As stated before, there are many students at Japanese SI's who wish to study in the U.S. for a year, but whose English proficiency is barely sufficient or slightly below the required level for enrolling in regular courses at American institutions. It follows that the most effective way for American universities to increase the number of incoming exchange students from Japan would be the establishment of an in-house ESL language school or the arrangement of a collaborative agreement with a nearby ESL school. Such measures would allow more Japanese collegiate students to come to the host American university as exchange students, take appropriate ESL courses at the language school, and enjoy the benefit of American collegiate life, with access to various facilities (e.g., library, theater, gymnasium, and swimming pools) and events (e.g., public lectures, concerts, sports, and exhibitions) and with opportunities to interact with American and international students. Since typical Japanese exchange students study for an academic year, the availability of ESL schools will increase the number of eligible outbound exchange students for U.S. universities.

**2. Paucity of Financial Aid for Studying Abroad**

Although the rewards may be plentiful, studying as an exchange student at Japanese universities handicaps U.S. students at least in two ways, as compared with staying at home. In the first place, they must pay for the transportation to and from the Japanese university, including the trans-Pacific flight. Secondly, officially, they cannot work

for income, part-time or full-time, to finance the cost of living and education, as they typically do at home.

In general, financial aid in the U.S. for studying abroad is very limited, as compared with financial aid for studying at home. A few scholarship programs do exist for American students studying in Japan, but they are hardly enough. From this perspective, it should be noted that the philanthropic policies of Japan-linked multi-national corporations located in the U.S. (e.g., Hitachi, Honda, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Sony, Toshiba, Toyota, and the like) needs reassessment and redirection. They should strongly support international education and exchange, as domestic market-focused U.S. firms would give little for the cause.

### **3. Bias towards the Study of Western Civilization**

By and large, international education at institutions of higher education (as well as elementary and secondary schools) in the U.S. has been slanted toward Western culture and civilization. For example, while European languages, such as French, German, Spanish, and Latin, are taught at most institutions, non-Western languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic, are not. Similarly, while the history of Western civilization or the Atlantic Community is commonly taught, that of non-Western civilization is not. As a result, studying abroad tends to lean toward such countries as France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It is about time that American universities take “affirmative action” to promote the study of non-Western civilization and culture.

### **Conclusion**

Probably more than ninety percent of collegiate students in Japan are acquainted with the Civil War in American history, while their U.S. counterparts are not acquainted with the Meiji Restoration in Japanese history. Most Japanese adults can probably cite the name of the current U.S. president, while their American counterparts cannot tell the name of the current Japanese prime minister. From such facts, we are tempted to argue that American universities should take more initiatives in establishing, promoting, and expanding U.S.-Japan collegiate student exchange programs.

To the contrary, it makes more sense to argue that more initiatives on the Japanese side are needed, while efforts on both sides are certainly

welcome. As mentioned earlier, English is the international language and the United States is the center of contemporary civilization and culture, whether one likes the situation or not. While American students can afford to be ignorant of Japanese language and naïve about Japanese culture, Japanese students need to become proficient in English and knowledgeable of American culture. It is hoped that Japanese universities, especially “SIs” (Superior Institutions), will exert greater effort in the areas outlined in this paper.