

International Education in Japan: Response of the grass-eaters

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Introduction

As is the norm in many countries, Japan practices a top-down versus a bottom-up approach to decision- and policy-making. Though ideas, words and phrases like "independent thinking," "self-direction" and "autonomous decision-making" are not unheard of, in the domain of education Japan's MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) is the preeminent power. MEXT exerts a strong influence at all levels, and in all aspects, of education—including international education. Thus, MEXT is a logical starting point for those interested in Japan's educational system.
<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/>

Background

Over the years, MEXT has issued a number of educational policies, recommendations and guidelines to Japan's institutes of higher education—especially national universities. [National universities were, until 2004, under the direct control of the central government.] For example, MEXT *Strategic International Cooperation Support Projects* have encouraged and assisted universities, especially those with large science and technology departments, to establish joint educational programs with higher education institutes in other countries. By doing this, the Japanese government and universities hope to promote and advance "internationalization."

In response, especially noticeable since 2005, the University of Tokushima began signing an increasing number of academic exchange agreements, Memorandums of Understanding, with overseas "partner" universities. Some of these are university wide agreements, applying to all academic divisions and departments of the signatories. Other agreements are more restrictive, applying only to specified departments or Schools: Medicine, Pharmacy and Engineering, for example. Since 2005, the University of Tokushima (UT) has

signed approximately twenty academic exchange agreements.

In addition to the standard academic exchange agreements, the UT School of Engineering and the Institute of Science and Technology (both are within the Graduate School) have established "double-degree" programs with some overseas universities.

[The *double-degree* term and concept was apparently borrowed by administrators at MEXT, a by-product of their perusal of the European-based Bologna Process proceedings.] (Note 1)

These double-degree (DD) programs make it possible for participating students, contingent upon successful completion of the specified requirements, to be awarded two separate and distinct graduate degrees: one from the partner institution, and one from the University of Tokushima. The programs are intended for Masters and Doctoral students, not undergraduates. Active DD programs are now in place between UT and universities located in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

All of these international-education linkages are intended to encourage student and scholar "mobility," another word and concept related to the Bologna Process. (Note 1) Expressing the idea slightly differently, the exchange agreements and double-degree programs are intended to:

--entice a greater number of international students to come to Japan and, *perhaps more importantly,*

--encourage Japanese students to participate in study-abroad programs.

Results

These attempts to *internationalize* Japanese education and students (and educators) present a strategic perspective; they provide insight into what policy-makers and educators expect, or hope, will happen. Also, embedded in these objectives and programs are certain presuppositions. Some of the basic

assumptions: students will participate; the programs will encourage student *mobility*; more non-Japanese students will attend Japan's universities and, like-wise, Japanese students will study abroad in greater, hopefully much greater, numbers.

However, when looking at overall participation in the UT double-degree programs since 2006, the movement of students is almost completely one-sided, the flow is *from* China and Korea *to* Japan. More specifically, the ratio of non-Japanese to Japanese student participation in the programs is roughly 19:1. (Note 2) As of 2011, it is estimated that fifty-six (56) Chinese and Korean students and, exactly, three (3) Japanese students have entered into the programs. The three Japanese students all signed for and participated in Chinese university-based double-degrees, none went to Korea. Of the three, one has successfully completed the program, the other two dropped out and are no longer participating.

Approximately fifteen graduate students from China and Korea are presently enrolled and actively participating in the same programs, all or nearly all are making excellent progress in their studies, and according to schedule. Though a handful of UT students (estimated at less than ten, as of fall semester, 2011), are taking part in several other short-term international educational opportunities, *currently there are no University of Tokushima students (Japanese or non-Japanese) enrolled and participating in the double-degree programs.*

The complete absence of Japanese students in the MEXT-inspired double-degree programs at UT is indicative of a widespread, national, pattern of attitudes and behavior in Japan, in terms of international education. Simply stated, the vast majority of Japanese university students are not interested in study-abroad, international-education type, programs.

The scarcity of Japanese young people interested in studying abroad has been the subject of a number of commentators, both Japanese and non-Japanese. From its peak (Note 3) the number of Japanese students studying overseas (the total number, as well as the percentage of all students) has been steadily falling; rates of student participation in overseas programs are typically thirty to fifty percent less than before.

Countervailing Trends: The Grass-Eating Generation

The general consensus in Japan is that disinterest in studying abroad is reflective of the values held by many Japanese young people, often referred to as the grass-eating generation. *Grass-eaters* are an important and identifiable sub-section of the current Japanese youth scene; a large proportion of this generation, young men in particular, identify themselves as grass-eaters.

The Japanese word is "soushokudanshi," literally, "grass-eating males." (Note 4) Though there are, apparently, some spelling variations and other differentiations on the *soushokudanshi* term and concept, the meaning, the image, is essentially the same. A grass eater, as defined by the Japanese grass-eater image, is a docile, non-assertive person; someone who desires and is fully content with a passive, stress-free, calm, routine-filled, lifestyle. Preferably, someone else—employer, teacher or university, parents or spouse—will always assume the final responsibility for making important decisions on his, or her, behalf.

In Japan the grass-eater phenomenon is genuine, and not confined to students only. However, Japanese educators, especially at the university level, are well acquainted with the *soushokudanshi* term and the qualities commonly associated with the imagery.

Alternative considerations, with comments

Other reasons to explain the lack of student interest in study abroad programs are sometimes cited:

1. Geographic location: In the case of the University of Tokushima, for example, someone might suggest that the problem is clear: there are not any robust exchange programs with English-speaking and European countries. Therefore the double-degree programs are not attractive.

Comment: It is not only study abroad programs in other Asian countries that are seeing low enrollment numbers. There is an across-the-board and continuing decline of students studying overseas. This seems to apply to all regions and countries, including English-speaking and European countries.

2. Economics/Finances: Due to the additional expenses associated with travel and studying overseas, students and their families cannot

afford the costs.

Comment: Though this reason is cited with some regularity, when discussing it in the past with Japanese administrators, it has been soundly rejected. Nearly always, according to administrators, the students' families do indeed possess sufficient financial resources; lack of money is not the main problem, it is lack of interest.

3. Demographics: The much-discussed, thoroughly documented, declining birthrate in Japan translates into fewer students nationwide. Thus, of course, the number of students potentially available for studying abroad is also declining.

Comment: Not only is the total number of students studying abroad in decline, the ratios and percentages of students doing so are also falling.

4. Academic calendar year differences: The Japanese school year begins in April, and ends in March. Some suggest that differences in the start and end of the academic calendar year create unnecessary difficulties for students who want to come to Japan, and for Japanese students who might want to study abroad.

Comment: This factor could, indeed, have a bearing on some institutional, family and student decisions whether or not to pursue international and study-abroad programs and opportunities. However, whether this factor is the most important issue in these decisions is unknown.

The belief that there is a connection between the Japanese academic calendar year and international education has been receiving substantial attention in the Japanese media. A proposal to change the academic calendar at the University of Tokyo ("Todai," in Japan) is now under formal review. If the proposed change is adopted, Todai students would begin the school year in September, rather than in April—as is the case now. A final decision is expected by the end of the year, 2011.

Occupying the top position in the Japanese university pecking order, in a top-down hierarchical-structured culture and society, with many of its graduates working for the government, and some occupying positions of rank in MEXT—a decision by the University of Tokyo in favor of changing the school-year start date could set in motion some far-reaching ripple effects. For example, it is probable that many institutions of higher learning, especially

Japan's national universities, would then also change their calendar years. In turn, if that were to happen, the entire school system (primary, middle, and high schools) would then be under pressure to likewise follow suit. However, it is not at all certain that a single factor—changing the start date of the academic calendar year, in this case—would result in a corresponding increase in the number of Japanese students seeking to study abroad.

Each of these alternative explanations—location, economics, demographics, a differing academic calendar year—have some possible merit for helping to explain why international education possibilities do not appeal to the current generation. However, there is an unspoken assumption when putting forth these other possible explanations that is not always discussed. The assumption is: *if* the supposed problem-causing difficulties were properly and fully addressed *then* there would be an increase in the number of students interested in studying outside of Japan. This, however, does not seem to be the case at all.

Indeed, when presented with a choice of studying overseas—even when conditions seem favorable, with few or no obstacles in the way—or staying in Japan, the majority of Japanese youth say they prefer to *stay home*. Mobility is not high on their list of priorities.

Summary

Discussing double-degree programs and other initiatives intended to promote international education at the University of Tokushima, and the lack of student interest, is in a certain sense, limited; UT is only one of many universities in Japan. Too, like many of Japan's national universities, a large proportion of UT students, graduate students in particular, belong to the science-based and engineering departments.

Engineering and science students, almost always with extensive backgrounds in mathematics, are known for having limited interest in matters (courses in other disciplines, for example) that do not clearly and directly connect with their specialties. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of UT engineering students are male, between eighty and ninety percent, depending on the year of study and the specialty. Therefore, it could be said, with some justification, that the UT graduate student population is not, in a strict sense,

"representative" of the entire spectrum of Japanese higher education.

However, despite these observations, it is fair to say that what is, and what has been, happening at UT in terms of international education and overseas study programs is consistent with other reports, anecdotes, numbers and observations, from both Japanese and non-Japanese perspectives.

Thus, when considering international education in Japan within a wider contextual framework, one is reminded of the axiom that what happens *outside* the classroom is often as important, if not more important, than what happens *inside* of it. Awareness of the grass-eating generation—their values, attitudes and behaviors—is useful for those hoping to understand, and interpret, international education trends and patterns in Japan. Familiarity with the grass-eating worldview provides a unique perspective to educators and other professionals; grass-eaters simultaneously reflect and influence existing social, cultural and attitudinal realities: realities that intertwine with—and often work against—internationalization, a repeatedly expressed aim of Japanese policymakers and university educators.

Some concluding thoughts

Though it is correct to observe that "grass-eater" values, patterns of thinking and behavior, can be associated with a majority of the present generation—it is not accurate to suggest or assume that *all* Japanese youth fit into the grass-eater category. There is a distinct group, a small minority whose numbers appear to be ever dwindling, who are keenly interested in matters related to international study (foreign languages, for example) and who do take advantage of overseas study opportunities. There are, undoubtedly, other institutions of higher learning in Japan that are experiencing greater levels of student participation in international and overseas programs: all-female universities, junior colleges, international universities, or colleges and universities that appeal to students who are more interested in the humanities or the social sciences, for instance.

Finally, there appears to be yet another, emerging, category: students who are somewhat interested, or who have a lukewarm interest, in an overseas educational experience. This group seems to be primarily comprised of students

who:

1) are indeed interested in studying abroad, but their foreign language, usually English, skills are lacking.

2) are not certain they want to spend a semester or more of their time studying overseas.

For this group of students there are, sometimes, other short-term overseas study opportunities that can become available. These "mini programs" seem to be catching on in popularity. The host institution in these cases is typically (though not always) located either in Europe or in an English-speaking country.

However, in nearly all these cases of very short-term (1-3 months, or less) study-abroad "programs," arrangements are made on a one-to-one basis between a UT professor and an overseas colleague. Importantly, in these situations, the student is not awarded academic credit by the overseas institution he or she is "attending." For in these particular instances the student does not apply to and, thus, is not formally enrolled in the university being visited. In certain respects, this type of international education experience is a hybrid; it is a cross between a bona fide short-term study-abroad program and an extended overseas vacation (holiday), with a measure of education added to it.

Notes

(1) MEXT policymakers and other Japanese educators closely follow educational trends and developments in other countries, particularly those occurring in European and English-speaking countries. For this reason, when considering the status of international education in Japan, it is helpful to review what has been happening in European higher education over the past eleven years—beginning with the 1999 launch of the Bologna Accord (also referred to as the Bologna Accords, or Bologna Process). The Bologna Process, a Euro-based series of educational reforms—an effort to bring more uniformity to definitions of higher education degrees and courses, thus making education more comparable, and accessible, across national boundaries—culminated in the 2010 establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The creation of the EHEA has been notably influenced by European Union ideals, by the process of EU political integration, and by terms and concepts from business and economics—

especially the concept of mobility: efficient movement of services, products, capital, and educational attainments. Not surprisingly, EHEA educators, their national governments, as well as EU policy makers, are interested in publicizing EHEA study opportunities. A potentially powerful attraction for overseas students—and their parents—is a uniquely-branded style and system of European higher education: identifiable, comparable across national boundaries, and marketable.

(2) Complete and accurate written records of the number of non-Japanese students (Chinese, and Korean) were not readily available for every year since 2006, the beginning of double-degree programs at the University of Tokushima. When it was necessary to make an informed estimation of student participation, a conservative estimate was deliberately chosen. The total number of non-Japanese, Chinese and Korean, students is likely sixty or more (rather than fifty-six, the number used here); possibly, it is considerably more than sixty. Using a higher number of sixty would yield a 20:1 ratio. The need to estimate was not necessary in the case of Japanese students, three, participating since 2006.

(3) Some writers seem to think that the high point, the peak, of Japanese students participating in international study abroad programs occurred in the late 1990s. The high point, in terms of the greatest number of Japanese students studying in the United States was reached, apparently, in 2000. Other sources (including MEXT) put forth numbers which indicate that the peak period was reached later, in 2005 or 2006. The important point: sources agree that the total number, and the percentage, of Japanese students studying abroad is trending down, with no indication that the downward retreat has yet run its course.

(4) The “soushokudanshi” (*grass-eating males*) image was reportedly first used by the Japanese woman writer, Maki Fukasawa, in 2006.

and Business Administration. Professional work experience in business, journalism and the United States Armed Forces.

Walter has both observed and has been active in a variety of Japanese educational settings. He has teaching experience in kindergartens (“yochien”), elementary and middle schools, and both private and national universities.

Research and Interests

Walter's research agenda includes an array of topics interconnected with International and Comparative Education. Recently, he has been taking an up-close multidisciplinary look at various aspects of English-language teaching, learning and testing in Japan. Of more than passing interest is how Japanese policy makers and educators associate the English language with internationalization and globalization.

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Educational and Professional Background

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