

## **Japanese-Side Barriers to U.S.-Japan Collegiate Student Exchange**

Kiyoshi Kawahito, Ph.D. and Professor Emeritus  
Advisor to the President and the Provost on Asian Affairs  
Middle Tennessee State University

### **Abstract**

Collegiate student exchange between Japanese and U.S. institutions is not developed as extensively and thoroughly as leaders in both countries, particularly in Japan, have envisioned for many years. This presentation explores causal factors of the underdevelopment on the Japanese side, focusing on undergraduate student exchange programs. These factors include (1) misunderstanding of the purpose of student exchange by faculty members and administrators, (2) inadequacy of English-competent full-time staff in the international exchange office, (3) absence of English-language brochures and booklets introducing international programs, (4) limitation in the number and variety of courses taught in English, as well as their descriptions, (5) lack of cooperation among various colleges within the university (called *gakubu* and typically translated as “faculty”), (6) non-compatibility of the academic calendar of most Japanese institutions with that of most of their U.S. counterparts, (7) shortage of reasonably-priced housing facilities, (8) excessive concern over credit exchange and conversion mechanism, and (9) under-supply of financial aids for studying abroad. Item (1) is by far the most important of all, because it leads to problems (2)-(6). On the other hand, (7), (8), and (9) are not as critical as some observers think.

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### **Introduction**

Japan and the United States are each other's principal partner 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 international conferences, trade fairs, business ventures, music concerts, sport tournaments, and the like in Brazil, Egypt, Italy, Kenya, Russia, Vietnam, or any other country, they must communicate in English, regardless of whether they like the language. Even at Japanese transplants in China, English is used for communication among Japanese and Chinese engineers and managers. Beyond language, they must also feel comfortable in associating and interacting with people of a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Aspiring university students in Japan are aware of these realities. They wish to develop and polish necessary communication skills through experience in living and studying in the U.S. They wish to cultivate some life-time friends, not only among Americans but also among international students from other countries.

The best way to materialize their wishes would be for universities in Japan to establish student exchange programs with their counterparts in the United States. Such exchange programs would provide Japanese students with opportunities to study and interact with Americans as well as other internationals in a most efficient and effective manner. In addition, this approach would involve less paperwork and time required for processing applications and admissions. It would cut down the cost of studying abroad, through the cooperative provision to offset waive tuition and fee payments for each other's students.

Unfortunately, the supply of such student exchange programs is relatively limited, compared with the demand. Many aspiring students must choose alternative avenues for their personal and professional development, such as attending ESL English language schools and participating in short-term sightseeing trips abroad. This paper explores

why undergraduate student exchange programs between Japanese and American institutions of higher education are underdeveloped, focusing on obstacles on the Japanese side.

## **Background**

In 2007, there were 756 institutions in Japan that offered at least four years of higher education. Of the total, 580 were private, 87 were “national,” and 89 were “public” (meaning municipal or prefectural), making the proportion of private institutions 76.7% (Monbu-Kagaku-sho, *Tokei Joho-- Gakko Kihon Chosa*. [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/08010901/002.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/08010901/002.htm)). They are called “daigaku” and 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 gyosei hojin” (independent administration university corporation) and gained substantial autonomy from the central government, even though they remained heavily dependent on national financing and have still been commonly called “kokuritsu” (national). In this paper, we will continue the use of the term “national,” although “formerly national” would be more accurate

In terms of the number of students, there were 2,829,000 university students, of which 22.2%, 4.6%, and 73.2% respectively attended national, public, and private institutions. Of the total, 40.0% were female students. Also of the total, 88.9% were undergraduate students.

If these 756 universities are ranked in terms of academic background of students and faculty (as measured by entrance examination scores and by research/publication records, respectively), 2-3%, or about 15-20, of the total may be classified as “Prestigious Institutions” (DIs). This group is led by national universities, such as Tokyo University and Kyoto University, but includes some outstanding private universities, such as Waseda University and Keio University. Their students and faculty are brilliant, and physical and financial resources are excellent. They have little problem in developing student exchange programs on their terms, because foreign students would be willing to adjust to any inconvenience (e.g., differences in academic calendar) for the opportunity to study there and because their own students are well-prepared for studying abroad (including English-language proficiency).

The next 30% from the top or about 200-250, may be classified as “Superior Institutions” (SIs). Most “national universities” and “public universities” which are not counted in the PI group belong to this category. Some private universities (say, 70-100

private institutions may be considered to be in this group...

SIs maintain a reservoir of talented students and faculty, as well as good facilities and financial resources. A good proportion of the students at SIs possess English language proficiency (as measured by TOEFL scores) for studying abroad. A fair proportion of faculty members are capable of offering courses in English. Unfortunately, most SIs appear to have been slow in developing viable programs of student exchange with U.S. institutions.

The next 30-40% or about 250-300 of the total, mostly private, may be classified as "Average Institutions" (AIs). Although they do have some talented students in English-language proficiency, the proportion of such students is relatively small. Most of AIs have a long way to go for concluding typical student exchange agreements with U.S. institutions. They would probably be better off if they support talented students' independent studying abroad, and provide the rest with opportunities for studying at intensive ESL English language schools in the U.S. and for participating in short-term international field study trips.

This paper is concerned mainly with all of the SIs (Superior Institutions) and some of the AIs (Average Institutions). The reader may interpret approximately that they are top 50% universities in Japan.

### **Ideal Model**

At this university in Japan which is idealized to facilitate discussions of this paper, all competent and willing students can study a semester or two at a U.S. institution as exchange students, because a similar number of American students are attracted to the university.

The basic and primary reason for the university's cultivation and promotion of student exchange programs is that its faculty members and administrators are deeply committed their own students and want to offer best opportunities for international education. They realize that the student exchange system is probably the best way to accomplish the objective in a least costly and most timely manner.

Certainly, having international students on campus would help global education, assist

personal development of foreign students, and contribute to the welfare and peace of the world. But these are indirect objectives and mostly natural consequences of successful attainment of the primary objective.

The system would allow the Japanese students to pay tuition and fees to their (home) institution while they are at the host institution in the U.S. The mechanism would greatly help those students who go to state institutions in the U.S. (where most American students are), because, as compared with independent students, they are spared from paying the out-of-state tuition which is typically three times higher than the in-state charge. The partnership would also reduce the cumbersome paperwork needed for seeking admission to the U.S. institution, as compared with the case of independent student applications.

To provide the study abroad opportunity to as many students as possible under the exchange system framework, the Japanese university would make itself attractive to American institutions and their students, because the number of outbound students is determined by the number of inbound students. Since American exchange students are not expected to be able to listen to lectures, prepare notes and reports, and take examinations in Japanese, a minimum number of courses must be offered in English to lure them to Japan. The more choices there are, the better. Needless to say, English-language course descriptions and other informational materials about the university and its programs must be available in print and on the Internet so that prospective American exchange students and their advisors can make appropriate plans. The office for international student exchange must be staffed with persons competent in written and oral communication in English.

If different colleges (*gakubu*) of the university are on the same campus, they are made to cooperate and coordinate with each other for international education and exchange. The total number of students to be exchanged with the partner institution is measured at the institutional level, not at the college level. For example, the college of education may annually send out two students to the college of liberal arts of a partner institution, while the college of business may receive two students from the college of engineering of from that institution, to attain the 2-for-2 balance.

As a major adjustment in luring American students, the Japanese university, would make its academic calendar compatible with that of most U.S. institutions, at least for its

international division. In other words, the fall semester is made to run from August/September to December and the spring semester, from January to May. The adjustment would allow American students to study in Japan in the fall and/or spring semester without causing a conflict with their study plan at home. It will also help various administrative offices of the partner institution, particularly those handling academic records and financial aids.

Some other preparations will help in attracting American students. For instance, low-cost housing may be assured by assigning a dormitory for exchange students, entering a special contract with a private apartment in their behalf, or even arranging a home-stay plan with a Japanese family. Various extra-curricular activity opportunities may be offered, including participation in Japanese arts (e.g., music, flower arrangement, calligraphy, and cooking), sports (e.g., judo, kendo, and karate), and cultural sight-seeing tours.

The closer the actual operation is to the hypothetical model, the better the chance for the development of viable student exchange programs would be. It is the opinion of the author of this article that the case of Kansai Gaidai University (Osaka) is close to the above ideal model. In 2007, KGU was successfully affiliated with nearly 150 institutions in the U.S. for student exchange purposes. Among smaller institutions, the case of Nanzan University (Nagoya) may be close to the ideal model.

### **Japanese-Side Barriers: A List**

Japanese-side obstacles to the development of successful student exchange programs with U.S. institutions includes the following:

- (1) Lack of thorough understanding of the purpose of international student exchange on the part of bureaucratic faculty members and administrators.
- (2) Inadequacy of English-language-competent full-time staff in the international exchange office.
- (3) Absence of English-language brochures and booklets introducing international programs.
- (4) Limitation in the number and variety of courses taught in English, as well as their descriptions.
- (5) Lack of cooperation among various colleges within the university.
- (6) Non-compatibility of the academic calendar with the convenience of American

students.

(7) Shortage of reasonably-priced housing facilities.

(8) Unwarranted concern over credit exchange/conversion agreements.

(9) Under-supply of financial aids for studying abroad.

The most important is Barrier (1), namely the lack of full understanding of the purpose of international student exchange by administrators and academics, because Barriers (2)-(6) result largely from (1).

### **Japanese-Side Barriers: Discussions**

Most Japanese institutions tend to follow guidelines set by the central government, faithfully or blindly and for years, even after they become antiquated and unpractical. For example, they have a dichotomy of administrators and academics, with little inter-change between them. They have a general job rotation system among administrative personnel, although some “specialists” remain in the same post. They have mutually-independent and rival-minded “gakubu,” (“colleges” or “schools” in the U.S. and “faculties” in Europe).

Bureaucratic faculty members and administrators, especially at national universities, tend to regard their acceptance of international students as contribution to the welfare of the country and the world and as favor to individual foreign students who are eager to acquire advanced knowledge and skill at their institution. They are proud, stubborn, and often arrogant with respect to international education and exchange. They are not very receptive to new ideas and tend to be very slow in making changes.

They reason that foreign students should study Japanese language first and acquire sufficient language proficiency, so that they can read books, listen to lectures, take examinations, and write reports in Japanese. Since they should understand Japanese well by the time of their application for admission, application instructions and forms may be in Japanese language only. Publications and other informational materials about programs, curricula, and courses at the university may be made available only in Japanese. Inquiries and responses should also be in Japanese basically. Staff members in the international exchange office, who are rotated among administrative employees every few years, do not need to be competent in English.

As a corollary, these bureaucrats are insensitive to the need of their own students for doing experiential learning in the English-speaking world and to its link to the attraction of exchange students from English-speaking countries. They find difficulty in understanding why they must offer at least some courses in English. They are very much resistant to the idea of synchronizing their academic calendar even partially with the North American standard, even if doing so would greatly facilitate Japan-U.S. student and scholar exchange programs. Even when various colleges (gakubu) are located on the same campus, each college maintains its own English-language instructors and tries to develop its own exchange programs with the unit of the equivalent discipline of foreign institutions. These colleges tend to regard each other as rivals or competitors in international education and exchange. Such practice would require a “coincidence of wants” and reduce the number of students for exchange.

The following statistics underscore the above observation. In 2007, there were 118,498 foreign students at Japanese institutions of higher education (including technical colleges, junior colleges, universities, and graduate schools.) Of the total, 78.7% came from China (including Taiwan) and S. Korea, reflecting their distinct advantage in learning the Japanese language. The United States accounted for only 1,805 or 1.5% of the total. Short-term study students, defined as non-degree-seeking students of less than a year’ duration, accounted for 1,252 of the 1,805 (Japan Student Services Organization, Gaikokujin Ryugakusei Zaiseki Jyokyo Chosa, 2007. [www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl\\_student/data07.html](http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl_student/data07.html))

In addition to the barriers discussed above, shortage of reasonable housing facilities, underdevelopment of credit exchange/conversion agreements, and inadequacy of financial aids are sometimes cited as negative factors that discourage American students from studying in Japan. The author of this paper believes that indeed they exert negative influence, but that they are not as critical as some observes think

According to the JASSO, only 22.9% of all foreign students studying in Japan in 2007 were able to stay in institution-provided housing facilities, and the rest stayed in private apartment and other housing facilities. However, the general practice is that Japanese universities give priority to visiting scholars and exchange students in allocation of their housing units or make special arrangements for them in the private sector, if necessary.

Credit exchange/conversion agreement may seem important among many universities in

Asia and in Europe where students advance yearly in lock step and graduate precisely in four years. Miscalculation of a few credits may delay their graduation for a year. In the U.S. the students' standing and graduation eligibility are essentially determined by the number of credit hours. Moreover, many U.S. universities hold commencements a few times a year, instead of just once a year.

Compared with the paucity of U.S.-side scholarships offered to Japanese students, the availability of JASSO scholarships to American exchange students is very fortunate. U.S. students also can apply to the ATJ (Association of Teachers of Japanese), the Freeman Foundation, and the like for financial aids for studying in Japan. A problem is that to apply for these scholarships the prospective American student must be first accepted by a Japanese institution which requires the presentation of financial capability.

## **Conclusions**

As mentioned earlier, English is the international language and the U.S. is the center of contemporary civilization and culture, whether one likes this reality or not. U.S. students can afford to be ignorant of Japanese language and naïve about Japanese culture. To function well as professionals in their careers, Japanese students need to become proficient in English and knowledgeable of American culture. This paper has been written from this perspective.

A separate paper should address American-side barriers to student exchange between Japan and the U.S. Such barriers include, among others, the traditional disregard in education of non-Western civilization and languages, relative paucity of financial aids for studying abroad, inadequacy of intensive ESL English language programs at universities, and red tape in visa application processing.