

An assessment of Japan as a viable study abroad destination as seen from the U.K.

イギリスからみた留学先としての日本の評価

Julyan NUTT*

ジュリアン ナット

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Japan's recent initiatives to globalize its universities in the face of competition from other universities within Asia, with an emphasis on the short- and long-term benefits of hosting international students. U.K. nationals were interviewed to assess their impression of Japan and its viability as a destination for international study. These interviews confirm there is a perception abroad that Japan is losing ground to its neighbors. In the hope of improving Japan's appeal as a study abroad destination, it is suggested that Japan better market its universities' strengths with greater private industry involvement in education and by focusing on Nobel awards.

要旨

本稿の目的は、近年日本の大学が国際化を求められている中で、外国の学生にとって日本の大学が留学先としてふさわしい、あるいは魅力的であるかどうかを検証するものである。複数のイギリス人に対し、日本の印象と留学先としての日本を評価するためにインタビューを実施した。これらのインタビューでは、産業界において日本はアジアの近隣諸国にとって代われ、日本の大学はアジアの大学より留学生獲得に消極的であり、留学生の増加はアジアの大学のほうが大きいということが判明した。産業界の関与やノーベル賞等の紹介を通して日本の強みをより一層売り込むことを提案する。

* 東海学園大学経営学部経営学科

1. Introduction

This paper will attempt to assess the viability of Japan as a study abroad destination by assessing its efforts to internationalize, its competition within Asia, and impressions of Japan revealed through interviews conducted in the U.K. with U.K. nationals.

Globalization is a word increasingly heard in Japan. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines globalization as “the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.” Japan is no stranger to globalization: Commodore Perry’s Black Ships forced Japan to end a century of isolation and open its doors to international trade in 1853. And the period after World War II saw a dismantling of the political system, a rewritten constitution, and democratization imposed on it by the U.S. Is now the time for a third transformation?

Japan’s academic excellence in research is unquestionable. No other country besides the U.S. has been awarded as many Nobel prizes in science this century (“21st century...” 2015). Recent laureates include Isamu Akasaki and Hiroshi Amano in 2014 for the invention of blue light-emitting diodes, Satoshi Omura and Takaki Kajita in 2015 in the respective fields of physiology and physics, and Yoshinori Ohsumi in 2016 for his work on autophagy. So perhaps understandably, Japan had felt that its academic institutions were thriving and there was little need to internationalize them. However, there has recently been increased recognition of the importance of globalization and a sense that Japan’s global outlook is falling behind its European and American counterparts and Asian neighbors. The Japanese government has been slow to recognize that in a globalized economy that relies on the free movement of knowledge and labor, the association between economic competitiveness and an international education is increasingly important. Improvement in Japan’s global university rankings, ignored until recently, is now at the forefront of Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) university reform policy. Only two universities, the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University, feature in the top one hundred universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) world rankings. Japanese academics had felt that Japan’s poor university rankings were a reflection of the bias that is more heavily weighted towards internationalized universities (Shin, 2013). Regionally, Singapore holds the two highest positions in the top 20 THE Asia ranking; China and Hong Kong have four universities each, and South Korea five. In contrast, Japan has only two. The relative position of Japanese universities is in

decline as other regional universities have caught up and in some cases overtaken the Japanese universities.

In order to halt this downward trajectory, MEXT launched the Top Global University (TGU) Project in 2014 with the objective of “enhancing the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan” (“Going International...”, 2016). It ambitiously aims to place ten Japanese universities in the top one hundred within a decade by increasing the number of foreign teaching faculty and international students and better aligning the academic system with international norms. Japanese universities typically have a foreign teaching faculty of 5% who are mainly limited to teaching foreign languages, whereas Harvard University (U. S.) had 30% and Cambridge University (U. K.) 41% in 2015 (*Times Higher Education*, n.d.).

Globally, the number of international students in tertiary education doubled within the first decade of this century. The average foreign student enrollment in 2013 for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries was 7.1%. Japan, however, remains behind the curve with only 3.1%. Foreign students account for 10% of the student population at the University of Tokyo, comparing unfavorably with 25% at Harvard University and 34% at Cambridge University (*Times Higher Education*, n.d.). In an attempt to rectify this, MEXT initially launched the Global 30 Project in fiscal 2009 with a plan to increase the number of foreign students to 300,000 by 2020. This project aimed to include thirty universities, but owing to budget cuts in the wake of the Tohoku disaster, that number was reduced to thirteen. The program was concluded in 2014 and superseded by the more ambitious TGU.

2. Short- and long- term benefits to hosting international students

There are huge benefits to hosting international students in both the short and long term and this can be seen where such programs have long been established, such as in the U.K. International students pay full fees and contribute over £4 billion annually to the U.K. economy. That money helps universities expand their facilities and offer programs that would not be economically viable without this financial input. In the U.K., international students account for 40% of postgraduates, helping to fund and sustain research programs. Spending by international students sustains thousands of jobs at universities and in local economies. In the longer term, many students decide to stay on, typically between 20% and 25% in OECD

countries, becoming a valuable part of the host nation's economy, particularly in areas where there is often a labor shortage such as in STEM-related¹ fields. Those that return to their countries may provide connections to the host nation that are mutually beneficial in terms of trade and potential business contacts (Impact of international students, 2014).

3. U.K. students and overseas study

In a recent poll commissioned by the British Council, a third of U.K. students between 16 and 30 expressed an interest in some form of overseas study. Of those, 50% said they wanted to have fun travelling and experiencing different cultures, 30% said they wanted to work for an international company, and 15% said that they wanted to go to the best universities worldwide. The EU's ERASMUS program² has seen an increase in interest, as have similar initiatives launched in China and India aimed at attracting U.K. students, with the latter having five times as many applicants as places (Gani, 2015).

In the 2014/15 academic year, 22,420 U.K. students in higher education took part in a study abroad program. Japan was the second most popular Asian destination, China was the first. Commonwealth countries dominate, reflecting the U.K.'s strong association with them. The ethnic background of those who study abroad is typically White (82%), with 17% identifying as coming from a Black, Minority, or Ethnic background ("HESA 2014/15...", n.d.). The areas of study were evenly distributed: one third language students, one third STEM students, and the remaining third neither language or STEM (e.g. arts, humanities, business or law).

Table 1: Top 10 most popular Asian destinations for overseas study for UK students 2014/15.

Ten most popular Asian destinations for U.K. students studying abroad	Global popularity ranking for U.K. students studying abroad	Number of U.K. students (2014/15 academic year)
1. China	8 th	700
2. Japan	10 th	375
3. Malaysia *	11 th	355
4. Hong Kong	16 th	285
5. India *	21 st	225

¹ STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math)

² ERASMUS (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) . A higher education exchange program with 33 participating E.U. countries established in 1987.

6. Singapore *	24 th	190
7. Sri Lanka *	27 th	165
8. South Korea	33 rd	140
9. Thailand	38 th	110
10. Nepal	44 th	80

[* denotes Commonwealth countries] ("HESA 2014/15...", n.d.)

4. Japan as a viable location for international study

In order to attract international students, the Japanese government is offering scholarships and other student aid as well as offering greater funding to universities to help develop programs, support systems, and employment assistance for international students. There is concern, however, among some academics about how long this will have popular support considering the ongoing reduction of the education budget, which saw a year-on-year decrease of 1.3% in fiscal 2015, in the face of an increasing welfare burden of 3.3% in the same year (Harding, 2015).

With Japan's push to reconfirm its position on the global stage and to make up ground lost to its more ambitious regional neighbors, its image abroad is vital. In an attempt to get an insight into how Japan is perceived, I interviewed ten people with a diverse range of occupations and ages, divided equally between the two sexes, on their perceptions of Japan. See tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2: Background of interviewees.

Person	Occupation	Age	Sex
A	Businessman (retired)	Late 60s	Male
B	Housewife	Late 60s	Female
C	Self-employed Builder	Mid 40s	Male
D	Freelance Artist	Mid 40s	Female
E	Air Traffic Controller	Early 40s	Male
F	Teacher	Late 30s	Female
G	Bar Staff	Early 30s	Female
H	Waiter (Polish)	Mid 20s	Male
I	University Student	Early 20s	Male
J	University Student	Late Teens	Female

Table 3: List of questions asked.

1. What is your impression of Japan and the Japanese?
2. What have you heard about Japan in the news?
3. Where does Japan fit in the world globally?
(economically, politically)
4. What problems / threats does Japan face in the future?
(globally, domestically)
5. Do you think Japan would be a good choice to study abroad?

5. Results of the interviews

5.1. Impressions of Japan

The majority of people described Japan as having a busy metropolitan landscape with high-rise buildings, bright neon lights, and bullet trains. There was an acknowledgement of a rural mountainous region of Japan by persons C, G and F with person F realizing that this limited the habitable areas in Japan to the coastline. Persons D and F mentioned fashion and design, and persons F and G touched on the cultural aspect of Japan: geishas, sumo, and the tea ceremony. The Japanese were described alternately as being polite by persons B and G, industrious by person A, well organized by person D, and technologically advanced by persons E, I and J. Persons I and J also felt the Japanese were cool, mentioning computer games and manga.

5.2. Japan in the news

It would appear that news on Japan has been widely reported in the news in England. The Tohoku earthquake and the resulting tsunami and nuclear incident were mentioned by the majority of people. Persons E and F were also aware of the impending abdication of the emperor, and persons A, C, E, and F mentioned the struggling economy and stagflation. More positively, people were aware of the Tokyo Olympics (persons A, H and J) and that Japan was hosting the Rugby World Cup (persons E and I).

5.3. Japan's position in the world

Japan was seen to rank highly on the world stage, and was described by person E as "punching above its weight." Toyota Motor Company's position as the second biggest car manufacturer was also acknowledged by persons A, H and I. Although person C felt that

Japan was slipping downwards, with persons A and C citing that there were not as many Japanese goods available for purchase in England, and persons A and E saying that technologically speaking, it has been overshadowed by Korea with person F adding China and the U.S.

5.4. Japanese problems and threats globally and domestically

With an awareness of the environmental disasters Japan has experienced, many people mentioned this as a threat to Japan, although half of the people asked were totally unaware of Japan's situation. On the political front, those that were aware (persons A, E and F) saw North Korea as a geopolitical threat, together with China. Economically, South Korea was seen as the most immediate threat by person A and F, the BRIC nations by persons E and C, with person C also mentioning emerging markets such as Vietnam and F mentioning the U.S. Domestically, Japan's aging population was acknowledged by persons E and F, and its hierarchical system was mentioned as a hindrance to economic development by person E. No one else was aware of Japanese domestic issues.

5.5. Japan as a study abroad location

Japan did not rate positively as a location to study abroad. Many, including the students, commented that it was too far from Europe, making the cost prohibitive: students in England are already burdened with astronomical fees and are most often saddled with debt on graduation. Japan was however considered to be receptive to the West by persons A, B and G, but language barriers and cultural differences were raised as potential problems by persons E and H. Person I thought that for the cultural experience alone, it would be worthwhile, but person E said to truly experience the culture the language should be understood, and he considered the Japanese language to be inaccessible. Person C, who had studied in Holland as part of his degree program, felt that the only positive to be gained from studying abroad was the cultural experience as he felt that little was learnt on such programs. He did however add that if students intended to seek employment in Asia, obtaining degree credits from a university in an Asian country would be beneficial, although presumably this is not specific to Japan. The question of why someone would choose Japan over other Asian countries was raised by several people. China was mentioned by persons A and I as the place to be in Asia as far as future opportunities are concerned. South Korea was observed to be fast overtaking Japan as the technological center of Asia by person A. And based on prestige

alone, a more recognized university such as the National University of Singapore was suggested as a better choice by person F.

6. Discussion

While the range of ages and occupations of those interviewed was broad, I acknowledge that the sample size is too small to offer an accurate insight into how the majority of U.K. nationals think. Nevertheless, a consistent theme was revealed. All the interviewees had a general impression of Japan, but perhaps somewhat predictably, those in what may be considered more prestigious occupations, namely the retired businessman, air traffic controller, self-employed builder and teacher, had a more comprehensive understanding of Japan's economic situation and its threats both economically and geopolitically. Those people had noticed a decline in Japan's market share in electronic goods, although this could be partially attributed to their age. They were aware that Japan, with its faltering economy, is already losing out to its regional competitors, particularly South Korea and China. This may come as a surprise to Japanese people, who consider Japan to be the leader with regards to high-tech manufacturing. Those countries, not Japan, were seen as future economic powers in the region and were more attractive as places for international study.

Before corrective measures can be put in place, accepting that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with is the first hurdle to overcome. Japan has belatedly joined the regional race to attempt to attract foreign faculty and students. Some traditionally popular locations for international study are losing market share to these emerging destinations. Between 2000 and 2011, the U.S. and Germany lost 6% and 3% of market share respectively. Japan grew marginally during this time, but the number of foreign faculty and students in South Korea—despite only claiming a negligible amount of the market in 2000—expanded seventeen-fold (“How is international...”, 2013).

Japan needs to focus on its positives. In the interviews that I conducted, Toyota Motor Company was recognized as being a world leader, but the electronics industry was seen to have lost ground to regional competitors: a reflection of how internationally that industry has become more globalized, where modular production and global supply chains have replaced one-country integral production, favored in Japan. The marketability of industrial leaders, like Toyota, should not be underestimated. Japan should closely examine the success achieved by

its closest rival South Korea, where collaborations with international universities, heavily funded by private industry, have led to the creation of international campuses and research facilities. Private industry has a vested interest in the globalization of its domestic universities, so this should be seen as a long-term investment, with the initial short-term costs to be outweighed by potential gains.

Japan's achievements in research are unparalleled in the region. It is perhaps ironic that the desire to emulate Japan's Nobel prize success is one of the driving forces that has led South Korea to internationalize. It has become a national obsession, spending more than any other OECD country (as a percentage of GDP) on research and development in 2014, driving its institutions up the THE rankings (Zastrow, 2016).

7. Conclusion

Japan, with its strict crippling demographics, should be doing its utmost to attract and keep the very best international students, augmented by lifting visa restrictions and providing future employment options. It should also adopt a more coordinated, collective national approach to better market itself as a research powerhouse at international student recruitment fairs, emphasizing its record of Nobel prizes. There is no reason why Japan cannot reverse the recent relative regional decline in the THE rankings of its academic institutions by embracing internationalization. It needs the political will to see this through to completion, in the face of opposition, with a long-term view to opening up and fully embracing the globalized economy. Failure to do so will bring the risk of Japan slipping further behind its ambitious neighbors.

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