Organizational Responses to Internationalization Initiatives at a Japanese University

Andrew NOWLAN*

Abstract

This paper examines various challenges facing a large Japanese university, regarding government-funded internationalization initiatives. The author will apply a language instructor's perspective in focusing on the institution's responses to funding, outcomes to date, and possible future directions. First, the research setting will be introduced, both on the national and institutional level. The author will then summarize and explain the issues facing the institution, which include 1) the development of cross-cultural programs to facilitate internationalization; 2) the process of encouraging students to enroll in these programs; and 3) the communication and collaboration between departments. For each issue, the author cites evidence that leaders have used, to varying degrees, to inform their decisions. Since there is still ambiguity about the specific internationalization goals of the institution, this report will close with potential methods of gauging longer-term effectiveness of organizational responses.

Introduction: The Research Setting

In addition to being a geographically isolated island nation, Japan is one of the most culturally homogenous countries in the world, with a population that is 98.5% ethnically Japanese (CIA Factbook, 2017). Further cultural characteristics include embedded Confucian philosophies and a population that is relatively collectivistic and insular (Burgess, Gibson, Klaphake, & Selzer, 2010). Compared to other countries, Japanese people often adhere to a *masculine* framework and operate under a

* Special Associate Professor of Language, Language Center, Kwansei Gakuin University

high degree of *uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In this case, masculinity refers to a society that has greater inclinations towards assertiveness and achievement, meaning that university students may hesitate to use a second language (L2), if they lack confidence or do not have native-like proficiency. Regarding uncertainty avoidance, Japanese students could be more reluctant to engage in new situations, such as studying abroad or engaging with non-Japanese students.

For the purposes of this report, the featured higher education institution (HEI) will be referred to throughout under the pseudonym "University of Japan" (UoJ). UoJ is considered as a top private university in its region. With a student population of over 22,000 across multiple campuses, it has a large, co-educational student body, and was founded by Christian missionaries in 1889. The current institutional goals are grounded in Christian principles, although evidence of these values can be difficult to identify in contemporary L2 curriculum. UoJ is composed mostly of ethnically Japanese students from the region; however, there are approximately 500 degree-seeking students as well as around 150 international exchange students who attend classes at the university for either one or two semesters. While the exchange students are often classified as visible minorities from North America and Europe, the degree-seeking students from abroad tend to be less-visible minorities from South Korea or China.

Because of a student population and teaching staff that is predominantly Japanese, Japanese cultural values are often espoused during the decision-making processes of individual departments and stakeholders. In response to the calls of globalization and the need to become internationalized in the increasingly competitive global environment, several new programs and recruiting strategies have been put in place that hope to satisfy the university's modern principles of global education, practical education, and interdisciplinary education.

Institutional Issues and Responses

The number of Japanese students going abroad for study has been in steady decline since the mid-2000s (MEXT, 2010), which is alarming considering the increase in global participation (OECD, 2011). In response to the decrease amongst Japanese students, the government has decided to fund several mid and top-tier universities to develop and execute programs intended to diversify campuses and embrace global internationalization (McNeil, 2010). In this section, three issues will be introduced, stemming from the initial ambition to internationalize programs to the learning experience at UoJ.

1) Development of Internationalized Programs

At the national level, study abroad participation is seen as evidence of internationalization. This is reflected in the goals of two recent governmental initiatives that UoJ has become affiliated with: Global 30 and Super (Top) Global Universities. Significant funding has been given to selected institutions through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) under the belief that "universities themselves should take a more active role in increasing opportunities for international exchange" (Yonezawa, 2010, p.121). The mission statement of Global 30 is "to nurture internationally competent individuals by creating an academic environment where international and Japanese students can learn from one another and build lasting international bonds that will propel them in the international scene" (Global 30, 2012, para.1).

The more recent initiative ― Super (Top) Global Universities ― is intended to bolster the standings of Japanese universities in the global rankings, with an ultimate goal of increasing the number of Japanese universities in the world's top 100 from two (i.e. University of Tokyo and Kyoto University), to 10 (Yonezawa, 2010). This program has been criticized as being overly domestic (Chapple, 2014), thus corroborating the sentiments expressed by Yonezawa (2010) and Burgess et al. (2010), who bemoan the contradictory goals in Japan, that is, the nationalistic closed-in mindset with an open-minded cosmopolitan reframing.

As a recipient of both initiatives, UoJ has invested more resources into increasing study abroad numbers. Past research has suggested that there are numerous benefits to studying abroad, though there are still struggles involved in enrolling students in such opportunities.

2) Enrolling Students in International Programs

Government funding for international initiatives has resulted in pressure to establish adequate programs that will both meet the demands of the government while complying with institutional and student goals. Past research has indicated that such goals can be at odds. For example, students at UoJ want to use English and interact with foreigners for friendship, amusement, and better cross-cultural understanding of pop culture (Wang & Nowlan, 2011). In contrast, UoJ and the Japanese government stress the need to increase intercultural contact for reasons involving *global human resources* and competitiveness (Yonezawa, 2010). While this discrepancy in purpose might discourage students from enrolling in an international program, several studies have identified high costs of studying abroad as a primary deterrent to participation (Lassegard, 2013; McNeil, 2010; Sanchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006).

Several academics and researchers have analyzed traditional and contemporary Japanese values to try and identify the factors at play which might help explain the

decline in study abroad. In addition to the cultural classifications of Hofstede et al. (2010), that define Japanese people as being averse to uncertainty and risk, students have been criticized for being overly inward thinking and not interested in the world outside of Japan (Asaoka & Yano, 2009). Furthermore, some argue that there is too much importance placed on securing employment in Japan during university, and the prospect of studying or traveling abroad has become a secondary priority (JICA, 2011). Ota (2011) adds to the discussion by claiming that Japanese students over-value safety and security and that they are unmotivated, unwilling, and poorly prepared for cross-cultural contact. Finally, with an ageing population, there has been a reported decline in students with the right qualifications and academic curiosity who are granted entrance into Japan's top-tier universities (Huang, 2011). This has resulted in a decreasing pool of qualified students who could be willing to study abroad and enroll in international programs.

3) Collaboration Between Departments

Consistent with reports by Yonezawa (2010), the decision-making authority in meeting internationalization goals has been passed along to the individual universities, and as a result, there is little collaboration between member institutions to ensure fair and balanced contributions to the national internationalization agenda. The institutions are then, in turn, passing along responsibility to individual instructors to integrate international components into classroom curriculum. At UoJ, despite a recent change in instructor contracts that has resulted in an increase in instructor numbers, there remains a lack of communication between the department responsible for advanced and elective language courses (i.e. the Language Center) and other departments. Some instructors at the institution are discouraged by this lack of communication and collaboration since they feel that synergistic and complementary roles could be played. For instance, the Language Center has little access to the department responsible for supporting foreign exchange students, and exchange students have few opportunities for genuine interactions with most Japanese students. Collaboration would be mutual beneficial to all students involved. Furthermore, the Language Center is run by a rotating committee of tenured Japanese professors who are not always informed of the day-to-day operations of the language program. This can result in a disconnect between needs of the university, the Language Center decision makers, the instructors, and students. To further illustrate this, L2 instructors have been informed that curriculum should be based on internationalization goals and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages (Council of Europe, 2001); however, specific direction has not been given on how to achieve this. Some instructors welcome the opportunity for autonomy, but others may interpret it as disorderly and inconsistent.

Role of Study Abroad

Being an isolated island nation, some consider the late response to internationalization by Japanese universities as reactionary and overdue (Ninomiya, Knight, & Watanabe, 2009). Because of the delayed and recent changes driven by globalization and internationalization initiatives, there is limited evidence that might indicate whether UoJ programs have been effective or not. An empirical way to gauge student interest in new internationalization initiatives involves program enrollment. While it is still too early to determine success of the programs, it is possible to speculate on those who could be more responsive. Prior studies have indicated that students with past experiences living abroad are more inclined to enroll in international and study abroad programs (Lassegard, 2013; McNeil, 2010). If this theory applies to the UoJ context, then students who enroll in international programs at the early stages of their university careers will be more inclined to join a second one in following years. This is an encouraging sign for Japan's HEIs since it is now sending fewer students abroad compared to neighboring countries with a significantly lower population, like Taiwan and South Korea (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Additionally, developing countries with lower populations, like Malaysia and Vietnam, are also sending more students abroad than Japan (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). McNeil (2010) as well as others (Lassegard, 2013) identify that students are discouraged from studying abroad because of financial constraints, so the Japanese government and UoJ have responded by providing opportunity to study abroad for special sessions at subsidized rates.

Studies have been conducted in Japan and other countries that gauge the academic and social benefits reaped by those who participate in study abroad and cross-cultural experiences. These benefits include greater fluency in the target language upon program completion, more social confidence, increased motivation to study the target language autonomously, and greater skill in cross-cultural communication (Freed, 1995; Williams, 2005; Ingram, 2005). Yamauchi (2006) looks specifically at international exposure between the universities in Japan with the largest number of foreign students, excluding international universities. This information could provide a backdrop similar to the Aubrey and Nowlan (2013) study that examined the differences in motivated learning behavior to study language based on the number of international students on campus. This study concluded that institutions such as UoJ (mostly Japanese students) can generate motivation through non-direct methods of international contact (foreign newspapers, magazines, etc.).

A sign that the internationalization initiatives of UoJ and Japanese institutions have stagnated involves measures of language proficiency. In addition to low scores in English proficiency tests, such as the TOEIC (The TOEIC Test, 2012), there are

more recent indications that overall performance in English as an L2 is decreasing. For instance, the English Proficiency Index (EF Education First, 2017) lists Japan as a country with low proficiency in English, lagging behind regional neighbors, South Korea and Taiwan.

Study Abroad and Governmental Initiatives

Still in progress, the Global 30 program plans to recruit up to 300,000 foreign students, while sending over 120,000 Japanese students abroad by the end of 2020 (Global 30, 2012). Some have criticized the program for applying ethnic quotas, which will theoretically result in under-achieving students being recruited from abroad, who have little interest in Japan (Keller, 2007; Ninomiya, Knight, & Watanabe, 2009). If this were the case, then the potential benefits of cross-cultural interactions on Japanese campuses could be compromised.

The government-led internationalization initiatives have encouraged Japanese HEIs to invest in promoting study abroad and building more ethnically diverse campuses. Past studies have produced evidence that study abroad and cross-cultural interactions result in personal growth, intercultural development, education and career attainment, social benefits, and motivation to use a target language (Dwyer, n.d.; Lassegard, 2013; Wang & Nowlan, 2011). If one agrees with Daly (2011) in saying that study abroad participants in Japan are a self-selecting group, then perhaps the existing research is not representing those who either have limited interest in foreign sojourns, or the ones who have had experiences that did not meet expectations.

In their 2010 publication, Piller, Takahashi, and Watanabe explore the social and personal costs of study abroad and internationalization that might not emerge from the type of research and evidence being presented at a public or promotional level. In this study, the authors cite the commodification of English language and the excessive financial, emotional, social, and cultural costs involved. They suggest that *language desire* is resulting in unrealistic expectations of the study abroad experience and students who are led to believe that their experiences abroad are more valuable than they really are. While Piller et al. (2010) draw conclusions based on the negative experiences of five female Japanese students who went abroad (Piller & Takahashi, 2006), it provides an argument against the current goals and approaches of programs like Global 30 and Super (Top) Global. The existence of this potential trend creates a challenge for HEIs and the Japanese government. If more disappointed students are exposed through research and evidence, then it could have adverse consequences, such as making it more difficult to receive future government funding. In response, it seems ethically responsible to manage expectations of students before they enroll in study abroad or international programs at the domestic

level, and certain UoJ programs aim to achieve this.

To assess the impact that change policy has had at UoJ, it is important to evaluate evidence that has led, or could lead, to more effective planning. Moen (2007) presents a view that leaders should use evidence to guide new policy implementation. At UoJ, there is currently a lack of related empirical data, so students should be surveyed to determine success of assimilating program objectives. This would allow for curriculum adjustments to facilitate compliance with institutional goals.

Role of Leadership in Change Management

Tagg's (2007) idea of *double-loop learning* provides stakeholders at UoJ, and across Japan, with a framework to begin fundamental action leadership. Compared to single-loop learning which focuses on a single action strategy, double-loop learning integrates governing values, or external stimulus that is always changing. For example, this could involve economic implications or evolving social beliefs. Double-loop learning would be a considerable step in Japan since its implementation could result in the questioning and challenging of existing policies that are often based on tradition, instead of merit. Literature abounds that touts the benefits of openness to change, transparent lines of communication, and fostering a culture of learning (Argyris, 2002, Gentle, 2007); however, how exactly is this accomplished in a culture often perceived as distant, high context, and insular (Hofstede et al., 2010; Okano, 2009)? UoJ, like other HEIs in Japan, is an established university where tradition and the hierarchy usually prevail over bottom-up leadership structures; however, a different paradigm is emerging with the implementation of internationalized L2 curriculum. If all stakeholders can come to an agreement that change policies should ultimately benefit the student, then the picture might become clearer as to the degree in which each stakeholder should participate in reaching institutional goals (Moen, 2007; Dooris, 2007). If the structure of UoJ can be changed so leaders can exist at all levels of the organization, then applying effective change to the three issues presented in this paper can be facilitated. Currently, Japanese leaders who have policy-altering authority are often dislocated from the daily operations of the Language Center, thus can be at a disadvantage when acquiring critical insight into the needs of instructors and the students. As a result, instructors exert an influence on curriculum, resulting in an unofficial and unspoken bottom-up approach to leadership. This will continue until the university enables action learning across all levels of the university in what would hopefully result in frank and open discussions (Argyris, 2002; Gentle, 2007).

There is belief that an academic, administrator, or leader's department can in-

fluence frame of thinking and plan implementation (Tagg, 2007). Since the Language Center leaders are rotating professors from different departments, it is reasonable to assume that they have different interpretations and ideas about how to run the department. There can be disagreement amongst the policy makers on how to best execute plans in the Language Center, thus leaving decisions to be made by instructors. An element of complexity that is added to this situation involves the language skills of the English instructors and policy makers. While some instructors do not speak Japanese, the English proficiency of stakeholders with executive decision-making authority varies from intermediate to advanced. This might give the leadership pause in confronting the instructors and opening lines of communication.

Gauging Long-Term Effectiveness of Responses

To determine the long-term effectiveness of programs like Global 30 and Super (Top) Global Universities, more empirical data, in-depth interviews, and action research are needed. As an initial step, the institution could measure motivated learning behavior variables and international posture (Yashima, 2010) before and after students complete these programs. If results are consistent with past studies where students exhibit significant intercultural development, these data and exemplars can be used to generate more interest and recruit greater numbers of students into the programs.

In striving to align cultures and behaviors with the characteristics of organizational learning, Gentle (2007) presents the criteria of *Change Academy*. This includes 1) team-based working and learning, 2) a developing knowledge base, and 3) effective and distributed leadership. Aside from the knowledge base that empowers the government to invest such funds into international programs in Japan's HEIs, the other features do not seem well represented. In a society aligned with top-down structures, a bottom-up approach to establish team-based working relationships and balanced leadership could be an alternative. If accomplished, more data could be obtained that addresses apprehensions and barriers to successful study abroad; a strategy which mirrors the features of action research (Gustavsen, 2008). Instead of reinforcing conclusions based on past research that tout the benefits of study abroad, involving a broad and diverse cross-section of stakeholders in research would be responsible in identifying and responding to the potential "dark side" of internationalization (Piller & Takahashi, 2006). The possible unstated and unconscious act of wanting to achieve success during and after study abroad and international programs represents governing values. In applying Tagg's (2007) framework, this involves single-loop learning and it can be an inadequate means to generate evidence when dissatisfaction emerges. To integrate the idea about study abroad possibly not meet-

ing expectations of students, double-loop learning should be considered in future research models.

From the analysis presented in this paper, it becomes evident that placing more value on flow of information and ideas would benefit all stakeholders at the institutions (Knight & Trowler, 2000). However, the greater challenge that is presented relates to compromising with the deeply rooted cultural characteristics of those involved. As an isolated island-nation with little diversity, trying to create a multicultural mindset amongst the students and staff within a very brief time frame presents numerous challenges. Regardless, UoJ has government funds it must spend in the short-term, so senior administrators are in a position to shift the cultural paradigm that exists at the university. International universities in Japan have succeeded in developing an obligation to help others learn an L2 and to increase the intercultural competence that has been concluded as pivotal in encouraging international sojourns (Aubrey & Nowlan, 2013). Although it is not realistic for a university like UoJ to enroll a large number of foreign students who can integrate into content courses taught in Japanese, perhaps it can still adhere to some of the principles of an *ecological university.*

To achieve qualities of an ecological university, Barnett (2011) endorses the creation of powerful learning environments and feasible utopias, defined as "ideas not as to how the university might be in the best of all possible worlds but rather how it might be its best in this world" (p.440). This seems like a suitable future direction considering the long-standing values held by Japanese people and the reluctant willingness to adopt foreign ideas. UoJ could start building toward the ecological university by aligning practices with the institutional goals and mission statements, and by fostering a *moral community,* or one where leadership enacts collaboration, trust, and promotion of the collective good (Sama & Shoaf, 2008). If applied to the described conflicts where cultural values may be imposed on others, a moral lapse could manifest. Instead, open communication and fair competition can potentially develop a cycle of trust amongst the Japanese and foreign staff at the institution. If accomplished, then the institution's greater goals can focus on developing students with diverse experiences who are truly world citizens.

Conclusion

To successfully meet the national and institutional goals derived from the discussed internationalization intitives, an effort is required by all stakeholders at the institution, including the students. With Japanese students embodying the national traits of collectivism and risk avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010), internationalization will not simply occur through funding and the presence of more foreign teachers

and students on campus. The successful assimilation of global citizenship traits can be facilitated by university administrators and faculty, but responsibility also rests on the shoulders of the UoJ students, who should embrace opportunities to interact with visiting students. Considering the perceived cultural gap between Japanese leaders and foreign instructors who are expected to enact change, one would hope that a similar degree of good faith and cooperation can be exhibited so that students can ultimately benefit from cross-cultural programs. Resistance to the changing global education landscape could discourage positive actions from manifesting at the student level (Argyris, 2001; Gentle, 2007) and this should remain as a top consideration when evaluating organizational change.

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