

***Internationalization at Home - Enhancing Students' Intercultural Competence in  
"Intercultural Collaborative Co-Learning Class"***

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**Abstract**

Japanese universities face an increasing demand - from students as well as industries - for quality education that is directly connected to the improvement of students' employability. One of the important components of employability is intercultural competence. As the world becomes more globalized and diversified, our students need to be not only internationally minded but also equipped with skills to effectively work with people from different backgrounds. Education-abroad will probably be the most effective way to develop the intercultural competence. Yet, data suggests that only a few percent of students on average in Japanese universities take advantage of studying abroad due to reasons such as financial difficulty, lack of language proficiency, fear of delaying graduation, and so forth. Intercultural co-learning collaborative classes designed to promote meaningful interactions between international and domestic students have great potential to develop students' intercultural competence while at home. In the classes, thematic discussions and/or collaborative projects by students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are built into the learner-centered lessons where different ways of thinking, values, and working styles are respected. The intensive interactions across cultures enable students to gain deeper insights into their differences and similarities, reflect on their own cultures and identities, and reconstruct themselves. Previous studies suggest the effectiveness of intercultural co-learning, yet few connect the benefits and intercultural competence development. This paper serves to examine the effects of intercultural co-learning between domestic and international students, introduces some pedagogical implications, and suggest policy makers to integrate the concept of Internationalization at Home (Beelen & Jones, 2015) into higher education in Japan as alternative for education abroad.

Keywords: Intercultural education, collaborative learning, project-based learning, internationalization at home

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## **Introduction**

Internationalization has brought about notable changes in higher education. In Japan, this was made possible through a few project-based educational reforms such as the Development of Global Human Resources (Go Global Japan or GGJ), where the focus is on fostering global talent. This term has several different applications. The project initiated by the Ministry of Education, Sport, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) defines the global talent as an individual who possesses the following qualities: “language and communication skills,” “independence, activeness, the desire to take on new challenges, cooperativeness and flexibility, responsibility,” “capability of appreciating other cultures while being aware of their own identity,” “leadership and teamwork through problem-solving”. Each university selected on this project is responsible for providing curricula that emphasize these sets of skills – whether it be accomplished through setting appropriate goals or reforming policies. Hence, every institution, department, and program should have its own unique definition of global talent.

The importance of providing such educational opportunities for students has become obvious over recent years. Climate change, natural disasters, terrorism, political unrest, and immigration problems all have their roots down in this single phenomenon we call globalization. The need for instructors at higher education institutions to respond to this dramatic shift in society has become more critical than ever. Language proficiency is no longer the only quality expected from global citizens. They must also demonstrate a wide range of refined skills such as attentive listening, negotiation skills, logical thinking, problem-solving skills, teamwork, and the ability to take action.

## **2 Cultivating Global Talent in Japan**

### **2-1 Recent Developments in Policies**

One of the first global policies implemented in Japanese higher education was “100,000 International Student Project” (1983) under the Prime Minister Nakasone’s Cabinet. Since then, several so-called global projects such as Global 30 (2009-2013), Go Global Japan (2012-2016), and Top Global (2014-2023) were carried out in order to internationalize higher education institutions in Japan. These policies encouraged higher education institutions to establish systems that would enable the take-in of talented students from abroad and allow domestic students to gain international experiences including education abroad. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the MEXT collaborated on the joint project called, “Asia Human Resources Fund” (2007-2013) to welcome international students and foster their talents in IT. The MEXT’s ongoing “Inter-University Exchange Project” is also serving as a driving force to internationalize Japanese higher education.

## **2-2 Defining Global Talent**

It is important to review what global human resources we, as a nation, are hoping to cultivate. “Global talent” is a unique Japanese term that has numerous applications, dependent upon each institution to interpret. This concept is thought to have originated after the economic bubble burst in Japan, alongside the emergence of a worldwide globalization movement as discussed earlier. In order to overcome the economic depression and to compete in the global market, Japan began to realize the importance of cultivating competent global human resources. The economic industry has its own expectations from higher education institutions regarding global talent cultivation. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) made its first involvement with this matter following their issuance of “Industry-University Partnership” in 2009, which later developed into “New Development Strategy Realization Meeting (Shinseichosenryakukaigi)” and then to “Global Human Resource Promotion Committee” (Yoshida, 2014). The latter meeting consisted of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Education, Health, Labor and Welfare. This indicates that nurturing global human resources was not only a common interest of different ministries. This was also a national project. It was on this meeting’s midterm report that the skills and qualities of global talent were discussed in detail.

## **2-3 Issues of Generic Skills and Graduate Attributes**

Between 1990 and 2000, education reforms of similar nature took place outside of Japan. These reforms focused on the acquisition of generic skills, such as key competency, EU competency, key skills, the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, transferable skills and employability. The employability advocated by Knight and Yorke (2003) was especially valued by higher education institutions to envision specific sets of skills and qualities crucial for students to acquire before graduation. For instance, the University of Kent or the University of Edinburg states in their university mission that the employability is one of their important graduate attributes.

These events outside of Japan, combined with critical issues within the nation – decreased international competitiveness due to ailing economy and the youth reluctant to strive for success – have led Japan to reconsider its interpretation of global talent. The MEXT’s “graduate attributes” (2007), the METI’s “fundamental competencies for working persons” (2006), the Cabinet Office’s “human strength”, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Education, Health, Labor and Welfare’s “foundational skills for employment” all incorporated the idea of competency, versatility, and employability. Together, these specific skills provide the basis of global talent. Evidently, some of these skills are specific to career development as they were suggested either by the METI or experts in similar fields. Moreover, these sets of skills also differ in depth with some being detailed and others not. Yoshihara (2007) blames the lack of harmony between educational and industrial experts who attended the Global Human

Resource Promotion Committee for this imbalance, and not sharing the same definition or interpretation of global talent.

## **2-4 Definition of Global Talent in GGJ**

Bearing this complexity in mind, it is quite interesting to see how 11 universities selected for the GGJ projects incorporate their core values into education policies that strengthen and support human resource development. However, these projects do fall short in one critical aspect. They seem to be ambiguous about the skills, qualities, and knowledge that their students are expected to obtain by graduation or the end of the term. The exception is linguistic ability, a skill which can be determined merely from administering score-based exams. It is as if they directly applied GGJ's definition of global talent to their programs. The GGJ's unique and flexible system is worth commending, in that each institution's educational policy is valued individually. The GGJ also strives to inspire youths who have been affected by the economic bubble burst and depression afterwards. What the GGJ could have done, however, is to demand the selected universities to provide detailed definitions/explanations about their graduate attributes, possibly in the form of rubrics for skill assessment.

## **3 Global Talent Cultivation and Study Abroad**

### **3-1 The Effects of Study Abroad on Human Resource Development**

Universities selected by the GGJ do, in fact, share the same passion for promoting study abroad. It is crucial that all of GGJ programs are built on the assumption that study abroad is integral to global talent cultivation. The GGJ has triggered the implementation of several government-funded study abroad programs such as "Leap for Tomorrow, Study-Abroad Initiative," a collaborative scholarship program of the industry and the MEXT.

Previous studies indicate that exposures to different cultures, practices and beliefs as well as experiences to overcome challenges while living in a different cultural environment enhance one's global competency. Research has proved that the effects of studying abroad are more profound than initially understood. Study abroad experiences strengthen intercultural communication skills, most significantly, the ability to express appreciation towards different cultures and values, and nourish creative-analytical thinking skills (William, 2005; Lee et al., 2012). Stebleton et al. (2013) also believes the greatest product of studying abroad is the substantial increase of intercultural competency. Similar effects have been reported in Japan. A research conducted by Kobayashi (2013) revealed that 91.7% of students who had studied abroad saw significant improvements in their command of foreign languages, followed by 89.8% who thought it was their communication skills that improved the most. In a similar study targeting scholarship students supported by the Japan Student Services Organization, Nomizu and Nitta (2014) concluded that a long-term study

abroad foster students' generic skills, specifically, foundational skills necessary for the workforce.

### **3-2 Factors Impeding Study Abroad**

The benefits of studying in an environment with different customs, traditions, languages, and values have been emphasized throughout the previous sections. However, it goes without saying that several factors such as financial issues, lack of language proficiency, delayed graduation, job-hunting related factors, and uncertainty towards living in a foreign country can stand in the student's study-abroad. Kojima et al. (2014) found that out of 418 domestic students, 142 showed no interest in studying abroad. A survey by Tohoku University in 2015 (N=2,595) also revealed that 51.8% of respondents "did not want to study abroad" with the most popular reasons being, "financial difficulty" (28.7%), "a lack of linguistic ability" (24.6%), "concerned about living overseas" (19.2%), "not willing to delay graduation" (18.9%), and "preferring Japan's safety and convenience" (18.8%). This indicates that no matter how established Japan's study abroad programs may be, not everyone is willing to take advantage of these opportunities.

Addressing some of these issues, in recent years, many non-profitable or non-governmental organizations have started to advertise their own scholarship opportunities to students, alongside several universities adopting similar reward programs. The industry is also undergoing accommodating changes. The Japan Economic Foundation has encouraged hirers to reconsider their time frames for recruitment and hosted special information sessions for post-study abroad students. Yet, financial issues still persist. With the economy yet to recover, many students still depend heavily on scholarships just to attend university, and these people simply cannot afford the luxury to study abroad, bearing in mind how costly tuition and living expenses can be.

### **3-3 Alternatives to Studying Abroad**

Under these circumstances, how can a higher education institution encourage its students to experience the outside world? What is an easier way to cultivate global talent if economic factors get in the way? Internationalization at Home (IoH) may be the answer. This concept was first introduced by Wachter (2003), and later endorsed by Knight (2004) as a crucial measure for higher education across the nation, alongside cross-border education. International associations such as the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) and the European Association of International Educators (EAIE) advocate IoH, and this movement is expected to spread to other regions over the years. In a comprehensive study (n=15,807), Soria and Troisi (2013) had students from nine public research universities in the United States self-assess their Global, International, Intercultural (GII) competency. Upon comparing the evaluations between students with study abroad experiences to students who were

more globally active on campus - such as taking international or global-related courses, interacting with international students, and partaking in international or global-related activities - they found the latter group displayed higher global competency. It is important to note that this study relies on subjective evaluations, and therefore, should not be used to prove the effectiveness of on-campus activities. However, it does imply that such on-campus learning experiences could equate to a single study abroad experience.

## **4 Internationalizing the Curriculum**

### **4-1 Intercultural Collaborative Co-learning**

Such collaborative learning between domestic and international students has begun to receive attentions in Japan. Intercultural collaborative co-learning classes provide both international and Japanese students with opportunities to learn from each other through "meaningful interactions." Thematic discussions and collaborative projects by students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are built into the learner-centered lessons where different ways of thinking, values, and working-styles are respected. The intensive interactions across cultures enable students to gain deeper insights into their differences and similarities, reflect on their own cultures and identities, and reconstruct themselves. Due to the nature of this concept, these classes are sometimes referred to as intercultural classes or multicultural classes. It is crucial to value a bidirectional, interactive, and cooperative learning process in this type of class (Van der Wende, 2000).

In Japan, however, multicultural classes are not held on a regular basis as students from abroad are still a minority. Furthermore, each university has its own preference for naming these types of classes (a multicultural class, multicultural coexistence, multicultural learning, intercultural appreciation, an intercultural communication class, mutual cultural learning, to name a few) yet structurally, they are all similar. A group of Japanese students and another group of international students are to learn together, which is "co-learning (kyoshu)" if translated directly into Japanese, but it is more intercultural collaborative learning.

It is the learning process that is valued most in intercultural co-learning. Students from different backgrounds share their own values, exchange opinions, and experience a wide range of emotions. By overcoming language and cultural barriers, they learn to accept and appreciate each other's differences, and come to reflect upon their own identities. This experience helps learners gain empathy as well as critical thinking skills. Meticulous planning and instructor's involvement are of crucial importance in the intercultural co-learning classes because they are not your typical lecture-based classes. Yet, the concept still remains simple. Intercultural collaborative learning leads students to a global perspective.

## **4-2 The Effects of Intercultural Collaborative Co-learning**

Several studies have confirmed the benefits of intercultural interaction between local and international students, both inside and outside of the classroom, and its relation to global competency (Leask, 2009). According to Leask and Carroll (2009), the interaction between domestic and international students should be always purposeful, but meaningful interaction is not something that occurs naturally. Instructors need to make the following adjustments along the way to facilitate intercultural interaction: 1) Having students map out a common goal to be accomplished, 2) assigning tasks and activities to students in accordance with the goal, 3) evaluating their learning outcomes that are connected to the goal and assignment.

Intercultural collaborative co-learning has been endorsed by experts of intercultural education also in Japan for over ten years. Kagami (1999) states that such educational interventions deepened learners' understanding of different cultures, widened their perspectives, increased self-awareness of their own development, and changed their attitudes toward different cultures positively. These opportunities also affect their attitudes toward multicultural understanding, such as learning to appreciate diversity and collaboration (Kagami, 2006) and positively influenced domestic students' motivation for intercultural communication, flexibility, self-control of emotion, and tolerance with uncertainty (Suematsu, 2014). This challenging process also enables international students to understand the Japanese way of communicating, and improve their own Japanese language communication skills along the way (Nakano, 2006).

## **4-3 Challenges in Practices**

Intercultural collaborative co-learning in Japan is still in the midst of development. It was initially started with the purpose of teaching international students "Nihonjijo" or Japanese current issues as part of Japanese language education. Instructors first brought Japanese students into their classes to increase a contact with natives for international students. Then they realized the benefits that domestic students enjoy from interacting with international students. The classes were gradually modified to also target domestic students. The second type of the intercultural co-learning was developed as a response to the internationalization of higher education initiated by Global 30 and GGJ. The classes were held in English. Some of the instructors, however, misunderstood that either classes taught in English or classes where international and Japanese students were taking together were all intercultural co-learning.

Examining the history of intercultural co-learning in Japan in fact, reveals that it lacks a proper backbone structure such as theories behind the practices or well-developed pedagogy. Educational practitioners who integrate intercultural collaborative co-learning into their teaching must attend to setting an appropriate theme and learning goal for the class, identifying possible resources for students, selecting a language of

instruction, determining the method and frequency of instructor's intervention, and choosing how to assess and evaluate students' learning outcomes.

## **5 Conclusion**

A government-sponsored project to develop instructor's guide in Australia, "Finding Common Ground" provides a framework for facilitating interaction between students of different language and cultural backgrounds. As indicated throughout, Japan must prioritize the construction of such a theoretical framework for intercultural co-learning. In addition, a platform where educational practitioners exchange ideas for pedagogical improvements needs to be developed. This type of network within university or even inter-university collaboration would serve as resources and faculty development opportunities. Furthermore, research looking into students' learning experiences as well as outcomes should be promoted.

Japan may still continue to struggle with the promotion of student mobility, especially the outbound. Yet there is much to expect from intercultural collaborative co-learning as an alternative or a supplement for education-abroad. Also, with the "300,000 International Student Project" launched in 2008, higher education institutions in Japan are continuously diversifying. In order for Japan to provide an appealing learning environment for both domestic and international students, educational practices such as intercultural co-learning must be built into the national curriculum. This internationalization of curriculum will lead Japanese higher education to an overall enhancement.



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