

***Hidden Academic Failure:  
The Course Experience of International Graduate Students in Japan***

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**Abstract**

More attention should be given to international graduate students enrolled in Japanese Universities. This study investigated the course experience of six international graduate students at one top Japanese University with PAC analysis and semi-structured interviews. As a result, international graduate students still have many challenges and dissatisfaction in their course-learning experience. The challenge and dissatisfaction in international graduate students' course experience could be listed as impractical syllabus, limited choice, impractical course content, inappropriate pedagogy, language barrier, unpleasant collaborative learning, useless assignment, barely feedback, and unclear assessment standard.

Keywords: Course Experience, EMI, JMI, International Graduate Students, Japan

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## Introduction

Driven by (1) the declining birthrate and an aging society; (2) The emergence of world university rankings; (3) The increasing student mobility; (4) New competitors in other Asian countries, the Japanese government announced 300,000 international students plan in 2008 (Ota, 2020). This plan aims at recruiting more excellent international students to Japanese higher institutions of higher education and helping them settle in Japan after graduation as highly skilled human resources (Fukushima, 2017). To support the 300,000 international student plan, the Japanese government has also launched various top-down initiatives, such as Global 30 (2009), and the Top Global University Project (2014), to attract more English-speaking international students and strengthen cooperation with outstanding overseas universities (Ota, 2020). Shimauchi (2018) has identified three primary stakeholders in the internationalization of Japanese higher education. The three primary stakeholders are the Japanese government, Japanese higher education, and students included by international students and domestic students. Shimauchi (2018) also stated that international students greatly influence other stakeholders. Those international students could be expected to enhance domestic students' international and intercultural competency and help Japanese universities move higher on very competitive global rankings (Shimauchi, 2018). Moreover, these students stand to become highly skilled human resources that can sustain Japan's economic position in an increasingly globalized and competitive world market (Ishikawa, 2009). To study more successfully and get a good job in Japan, international students must have good professional and intercultural abilities.

However, little attention has been given to international students' course experience related to their professional and intercultural abilities. This research aimed to reveal international graduate students' course experience and learning outcomes in specialized courses at one flagship Japanese university.

## Research method

### Participants

Among international graduate students who studied in Japan for one year to four years, six graduate students majoring in various subjects at one top Japanese university were selected for the current study (see Table 1).

Table 1 Demographic Information of the Participants

Name	Country of origin	Language	Gender	Major	Grade	Program
L	China	Japanese-speaking	female	Educational Policy	M2	Master Program
Q	China	Japanese-speaking	female	Educational Informatics	M2	Master Program
X	China	English-speaking	male	Environmental Studies	D1	Doctoral Program

C	China	English-speaking	female	Biofunctional Chemistry	D2	Doctoral Program
F	Indonesia	English-speaking	male	Robotics	D2	Doctoral Program
G	China	English-speaking	male	Robotics	D3	Doctoral Program

### Data collection and analysis

The ethical review process was obtained prior to the data collection at the author's university.

Data were collected through two qualitative research methods: PAC analysis and semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

PAC analysis (Naito, 2002) is abbreviated by Personal Attitude Construct analysis. It is a research method for measuring and analyzing the individual structure of attitudes and images from free association. One of the advantages of PAC analysis, it can promote the interviewee's deep reflection in a way that minimizes the intentions and influence of the interviewer (Naito, 2002). This study intended to explore the more comprehensive and reflective course experience of international graduate students. Therefore, PAC analysis and semi-structured, in-depth interviews were regarded as appropriate research methods. The design of questions in the semi-structured interview was based on Biggs' 3P model (Presage-Progress-Product) (Biggs, 1993; 2003).

All the interviews lasted from 120 to 150 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. MAXQDA coded transcription of the interview data.

### Findings

The results show that the course experience of international graduate students can be divided into [high satisfaction], [dissatisfaction], and [academic challenges] (see Figure 1). In the [high satisfaction] part, six international graduate students highly evaluated the professionalism of teachers, and they thought they were very kind. On the other hand, there are still many [dissatisfaction], [academic challenges] in their learning experience. Moreover, those [dissatisfaction] and [academic challenge] may be related to their actual learning outcomes. However, those issues were hidden because of good final grades with unsolved [dissatisfaction] and [academic challenge].

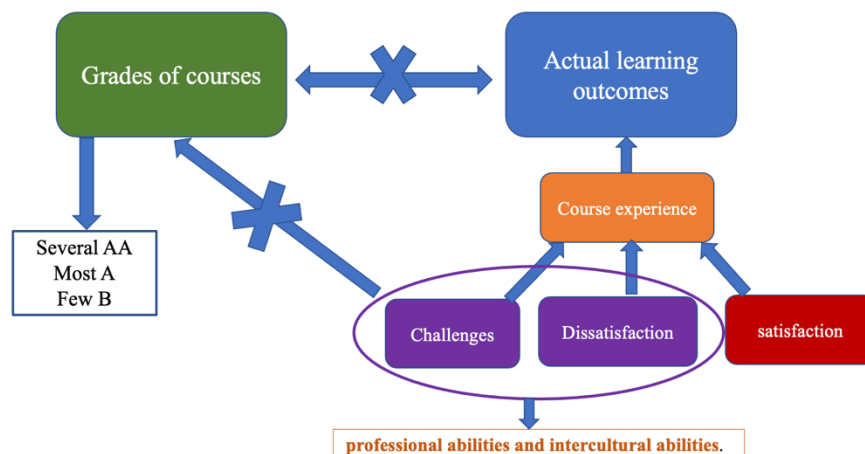


Figure 1 The course experience of international graduate students

### Challenge and Dissatisfaction

The challenge and dissatisfaction in international graduate students' course experience could be listed as impractical syllabus, limited choice, impractical course content, inappropriate pedagogy, language barrier, unpleasant collaborative learning, useless assignment, barely feedback, and unclear assessment.

#### Impractical syllabus

Student Q and student F stated they needed help getting helpful enough information from the syllabus to choose courses.

So many courses have similar names that sometimes I get confused. (Student Q)

Student F also mentioned same trouble.

Moreover, the syllabus sometimes did not provide enough information to help me understand the course's goal or structure. Thus, I need to ask some senior students to give me more details about the course, such as course content, pedagogical approach, assignment, grade assessment, and so on. (Student F)

#### Limited choice

English-speaking international students have complained that they do not have enough choices when they choose the courses.

Some courses are only available for Japanese-speaking students, but those courses may be beneficial to my research field. So I could not take them even if I would like to. (Student F)

Student G also stated the same difficulty.

The specialized courses in English-medium instruction (EMI) are too easy. It's much easier than those specialized courses that are taught in Japanese. This makes me feel dissatisfied. The courses I chose are all taught in English. Moreover, the contents of

these courses are not helpful to my study because they are too simple. I think the course wasted my time since I took nearly one hour from the K campus to the A campus to take the course. I found that the courses Japanese students take are much better than those I take. (Student C)

### **Impractical course content**

Although the course content involved some cut-edge research or meaningful theory, it is hard for the students to connect their previous knowledge with the course content. Moreover, some students do not believe the knowledge they have learned will be applied to their future careers.

Most of the courses are closely related to the teacher's research. Nevertheless, the content of these courses does not necessarily help my research direction, and many of them are outside my body of knowledge. (Student C)

Student G and Student F also stated the same thinking.

It is tough to find any relevance or connection between what I have known and course content. (Student G)

I took many courses, and it seemed like I learned many things. But now I cannot recall any of the content I learned. (Student X)

Student Q also shared the same statement.

And I do not think the content will help me in my future work. (Student Q)

### **Inappropriate pedagogy**

All six students have complained that international students only have a few chances to communicate with teachers and peers due to one-directional class instruction. Student G and Student X stated that the class pace was too fast to understand.

Most teachers only use one directional instruction, read the PowerPoint slides from beginning to end, do not interact with students, and do not ask students to do some collaborative learning such as group discussions. (Student L)

Student Q, X, C, G, F also have the same statement as Student L.

Some courses require a foundation of expertise to be understood. We did not have the prerequisite knowledge, but the teacher just acquiesced that we knew. Often, they start with complicated knowledge. My knowledge of the content is still at the first step, and the teacher has already talked about the 5th step. (Student G)

Even in the same course, the content of each lesson spans very wide and has little relevance to each other. Often, before I understand the content of the previous lesson, the teacher starts talking about the new content already. Also, the teacher does not leave the course materials for the students, so It's tough to learn by myself after the class. (Student X)

Student G also shared the same experience.

### **Language barrier**

Japanese-speaking international students stated that they have some language issues in course learning. On the other hand, English-speaking students said that the teacher could not explain the course content clearly when they used English.

I understand every word that appears in the sentence, but I cannot understand the meaning of the whole sentence. I think there are two reasons for this: my Japanese is not good enough, and the other is that understanding these contents may require some related prerequisite knowledge that I do not have. (Student L)

Student Q also stated the same difficulty.

Sometimes, I even cannot understand the assignment. (Student Q)

There was an inorganic chemistry teacher who had a good course content set. However, he could not communicate well with the students because of his poor English. The course contained lots of professional terminology and mechanics. However, the teacher could not explain the content very clearly in English, and he often used words that did not make sense. So, we were perplexed about his explanation. (Student C)

### **Unpleasant collaborative learning**

Besides student G and student L, the rest of the four students have yet to experience collaborative learning activities with domestic students. Regarding the collaborative learning activities, student L stated that she could have some new ideas through group discussions with domestic students. Student G also stated that the learning outcomes were relatively high. However, student G did not think that he enjoyed the collaborative learning activity due to the ineffective communication and cooperation among group members.

Although there were four in our group, only the Pakistani international student and I engaged in serious work. The other two members (a Chinese international student and a Japanese student) hardly contributed anything; they were very passive in the collaborative work and demonstrated no interest in putting in any effort. They were silent during our group discussions, preventing us from effectively communicating and cooperating. In the end, the Pakistani student and I did all the work assigned to all four of us. We received the only AA grades in the class, even though I do not think it is a pleasant collaborative learning experience. (Student G)

### **Useless assignment**

Students show less satisfaction in reporting assignments because they need to have a clear goal in academic writing and encounter some difficulty in their writing.

I do not think the report assignment was beneficial. The topics were not very relevant to the course content taught by the teacher. Simply put, I could have completed the

report without going to class. I knew some students who rarely went to class and got an A. (Student G)

Some courses take weekly report assignments, and each has a small word count. I do not think such assignments are beneficial for my study. I do not spend much time on information gathering and thinking. I am busy completing the assignments, not using them for deeper study or review. (Student X)

I was encountering some difficulties while researching and writing my report. During the research stage, I often wanted to know whether I was using the correct keywords in conducting searches or whether the information I collected was true and reliable. Moreover, I struggled to determine whether my analysis method was flawed when analyzing the collected information. (Student G)

### **No feedback**

Students also complained that the teachers did not provide helpful feedback on their report assignments, which has brought a negative effect on their study motivation.

After submitting the report, I did not get any feedback except the grade. (Student L)

Student Q, X, C, G, F also mentioned the same thing.

So I had no idea if my report was well written or what needed to be improved and how to make such improvements. (Student Q)

Student G, X also shared the same confusion.

As a result, I put less and less effort into writing reports—I realized the teachers may not be reading our reports very carefully or spending much time or energy on our courses. (Student G)

### **Unclear assessment standard**

All six students stated they needed clarification with teachers' assessment standards.

I had no sense of the teacher's evaluation criteria. I felt that the final grading was more like a black-box operation. Maybe the teachers have their assessment standard in their head, but they did not tell us what it was. (Student G)

Student X also shared the same opinion.

There is a course called [+++ science]. I got a B in that course. This is the only B in my whole course. However, I do not know what his grading standard was. So the grade of B did not improve my understanding or ability or anything at all. (Student C)

I got an A in one course, but I did not understand the course content. (Student Q)

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the dissatisfaction and challenge of international graduate students can be described as impractical syllabus, limited choice, impractical course content, inappropriate pedagogy, language barrier, unpleasant collaborative learning, useless assignment, no feedback, unclear assessment standard. Students may have some difficulty to set their learning goals with impractical syllabus. Limited choice, impractical course content and useless assignment could lower student's learning motivation. Students may face more difficulties in their course learning and get lower learning outcomes due to the inappropriate pedagogy and language barrier. Unpleasant collaborative learning experience may lead a negative attitude of international students towards intercultural communication. Students may have no idea how to do better and have low self-determination to improve their learning outcomes due to no feedback and unclear assessment standard. Since most graduate students could get high final grades, they may ignore their challenge and remain silent about their dissatisfaction. As a result, the academic failures of international graduate students could possibly be hidden.

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