

Sustaining Internationalization: English-Medium Programs in Japan

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English-medium instruction (EMI) was initially established in Japan to attract talented international students by lessening the burden of learning Japanese, and is now becoming a considered element of internationalization at home.

English-Medium Education as a Government-Led Strategy

EMI programs are key to Japan's higher education internationalization efforts. Undergraduates can now study for at least part of their degree in English in more than 40 percent of the nation's nearly 800 universities and there are 87 degree programs fully taught in English. However, in recent years, the growth in the number of institutions offering EMI has slowed. It appears that universities are no longer establishing new courses to follow the trend and EMI is reaching a point of maturity.

EMI has not become mainstream and is not supplanting Japanese-medium instruction, nor should it be. After all, the majority of graduates will work domestically in primarily Japanese-language environments and thus have little real need for full degree programs in English. In our view, this stabilization of EMI will prevent it from being pushed into inappropriate spheres and will ensure high-quality, sustainable programs over the long term. We need only look at South Korea for an example of how external pressure to implement EMI too widely puts institutions, faculty, and students under untenable pressure. But for EMI to become embedded and remain a permanent fixture in Japan's higher education landscape, universities should now be looking at ways to sustain programming.

In Japan, as in much of East Asia, university internationalization strategies are largely government driven. This can accelerate the implementation of policies and programs, but raises concern over sustainability once funding is halted. Two large-scale government funding schemes, the Global 30 (G30) Project and the Top Global University Project (beginning in 2009 and 2014 respectively), have explicitly called for EMI and driven much of the recent implementation. However, funding cycles invariably end and universities are left to fend for themselves. Newly established programs have not only to determine if they are able to obtain financial support from within the university, but they also have to figure out how to further develop their curricula in the absence of a strategic vision beyond the funding cycle.

When the G30 Project ended in 2014, institutions experienced particular challenges with regard to human resources. With administrative and teaching staff salaries often directly supported by the project, universities lost program capacity and know-how. The Top Global Project will end in 2024 and with no guarantee of future funding, the 37 recipient universities should now look at lessons learned and plan for their future. A good option for sustaining programs is to use existing internal resources. In the case of EMI, this demands rethinking the scope and goals of programs and expanding institutional support for faculty members.

Widening the Scope of Internationalization Efforts

One of the aims of many EMI programs is to create a learning environment in which international and local students can learn from one another. Yet, the G30 programs often found that, in practice, English distanced international students from the Japanese community. During the funding cycle, much effort was made to improve infrastructure to welcome non-Japanese speaking students, and in a few cases local students were also able to take G30 English-taught courses. However, in many instances, EMI programs

Abstract

The number of degree programs and courses taught in English at Japanese universities has increased considerably over the past ten years. However, there are concerns about the sustainability of such programming. With government-supported initiatives ending, universities must now reflect on lessons learned and adapt accordingly. For English-medium instruction (EMI) to be fully embedded in the Japanese higher education landscape, universities need to reexamine the scope of their programs and focus on internal resources and structures.

EMI programs are key to Japan's higher education internationalization efforts.

were established outside the main Japanese curriculum and in some cases even away from the main campus. The programs became isolated communities. The intended internationalization did not usually reach the local students. More than seven years on, many universities still face the same challenge. Widening the scope of EMI to encompass more of the local campus community is a significant factor in sustaining and embedding EMI programs.

As universities reflect on the lessons learned from the G30 project, EMI programs are evolving. Some universities are using existing resources and are combining English-medium programs with Japanese-based curricula, and a dual language program model has been gaining ground. Here, students initially study in English while learning the Japanese language. They then shift the medium of education to Japanese and study with local students. The pattern is reversed for Japanese students wishing to pursue classes in English. This model allows international and local students to go back and forth between languages and encourages interculturality. It also trains international students to become a part of Japan's future workforce and prepares Japanese students for international roles. This type of plurilingual program has been quite common in Europe, but for Japan it represents a shift in thinking away from "international equals English." It expands the scope of internationalization and, through benefiting a larger number of students, unlocks extra university financial support.

Professional Development for Sustainability

Faculty buy-in is important for sustaining any new educational innovation. It is especially important for EMI in Japan, given the funding cycles and subsequent loss of term-teaching staff. However, research highlights a concern that faculty members in EMI are overburdened and undersupported. To embed EMI into existing programs, faculty need to feel supported to make the transition to teaching in English. Unfortunately, current professional development (PD) efforts do not have a good reputation among faculty members. Many confide that they do not attend sessions offered by their institutions, or they do so out of a sense of duty rather than interest.

We therefore recently investigated the current state of teacher support for EMI in Japanese universities. Encouragingly, we found that more than 45 percent of respondents had taken part in in-service EMI training. However, fewer—only 20 percent—had completed preservice EMI training, usually as part of graduate studies overseas. Moreover, several respondents conflated English-language training with EMI-related PD, and some reported that they felt that PD at their university was intended only for native Japanese speakers.

The EMI research community recognizes the importance of targeted training for pedagogy and cultural awareness to facilitate learning in EMI classrooms. Consequently, the number of commercially available PD programs that support professors in these activities is growing. In Japan, an increasing number of institutions are enrolling faculty members on such programs, and as these courses have shifted online during the pandemic, therefore requiring less of a time commitment, participation rates have grown. However, budgets for outsourced training remain tight. The number of in-house symposia and workshops targeting EMI is similarly increasing, but unfortunately these activities are often small-scale, primarily attracting those with a prior interest in EMI research and practice. Organizers have difficulty persuading faculty members of the value of PD delivered by in-house experts and, as with any other type of PD, faculty members feel there are too many demands on their time.

The Next Steps

As EMI programs become more mature and fully embedded in universities' curricula, our thoughts must turn from start-up and implementation to maintenance and sustainability. Japanese universities have largely been successful in developing curricula and programs that meet the students' needs, and they are finding a stable place for those programs in the university community. For many institutions, the project funding cycle is just the beginning of EMI. The next steps in sustaining this feature of Japan's higher education internationalization must be to ensure that EMI reaches the wider campus and that the faculty members organizing, planning, and delivering EMI programs are prepared and supported. ▲

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