

Internationalization of Japanese Universities in the COVID-19 Era

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Since the late 2000s, the Japanese government has been promoting the internationalization of universities by providing several competitive grants. Grant-recipient universities are facing challenges implementing their original plans during the pandemic, and many among them have started using ICT tools to continue international exchanges virtually. What are the characteristics of their responses to the pandemic, and how do those universities see prospects for international exchange? This article explores the efforts of Japanese universities selected for the two recent competitive grant projects for internationalization, the Inter-University Exchange Project (IUEP) and the Top Global University Project (TGUP).

Recent Government's Projects

The IUEP started first, in 2011. This project is meant to promote two-way student exchanges between Japan and countries or regions that are specified each year by the ministry of education, technology, and culture (MEXT). Selected universities receive grants for five years. In recent years, the target countries and regions were East Asia and ASEAN in 2016; Russia and India in 2017; the United States in 2018; the European Union in 2019; and Africa in 2020.

Another grant is the TGUP, which started in 2014. Thirty-seven universities were selected and will be receiving funding for 10 years, until 2023. One of the main goals of this project is to improve the international profile of those universities through institutionwide reforms and internationalization efforts.

Fifty universities have been selected to receive one or both of these grants as of the academic year 2020–2021. Nineteen universities receive both TGUP and IUEP grants; 18 universities receive only TGUP grants; and 13 universities receive only IUEP grants. These universities are expected to develop good practices of international online exchange with the grants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities that do not receive such grants will later on be able to learn from these good practices.

Universities' Responses to COVID-19

According to the MEXT survey of these 50 universities in November 2020, more than 90 percent reported that they faced difficulties in pursuing internationalization due to the massive cancellation of academic and student exchange programs caused by the

Abstract

Japanese universities receiving government funding for internationalization are facing challenges implementing their original plans in the wake of the pandemic. Many among them have started using ICT tools to continue international exchanges virtually. This article explores the responses, prospects, and challenges of Japanese universities selected for the two recent government grants for internationalization, the Inter-University Exchange Project (IUEP) and the Top Global University Project (TGUP).

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pandemic. Also, 84 percent of those responded that they needed to revise their internationalization strategies to prepare for the post-COVID-19 era, a challenging task.

Under the unprecedented situation caused by COVID-19, most of these universities started utilizing ICT to continue international exchanges and learning virtually. One of the most common practices is encouraging students to participate in short-term online programs, typically lasting a few weeks, offered by universities abroad. Before the pandemic, participants of short-term (up to one month) study abroad programs represented more than 60 percent of the Japanese university students who went abroad for learning. During the pandemic, a similar trend has been identified. Most of these short-term online programs have been developed entirely by universities overseas. In contrast, some other programs have been set up in collaboration with Japanese universities in order to cater to the specific needs of Japanese students or to incorporate collaborative learning between the students of Japanese and overseas universities. Many of those short-term programs focus on learning English or other foreign languages.

In addition, funded universities developed one or two semester-long virtual mobility programs. These are alternatives to mutual student exchange programs with partner universities abroad. In virtual mobility programs, Japanese exchange students do not travel abroad but still take online courses offered by partner universities overseas. Students of partner universities do the same, taking online courses offered by Japanese universities. Some universities have developed an online platform system for virtual student mobility in collaboration with partner universities abroad. One example is the “Course Jukebox” platform of the University of Tsukuba, which, as of April 2021, offers 2,805 courses to the students of eight partner universities overseas. In addition, international consortiums of universities also offer virtual mobility programs. Quite a few funded universities are members of those consortiums (e.g., the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, APRU, and University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific, UMAP), and offer their online courses to the consortium, encouraging their students to enroll in online courses offered by other consortium members.

While many universities began to engage in ICT as an emergency response to the pandemic, IUEP universities selected in 2018 had been practicing “Collaborative Online International Learning” (COIL) with US universities well before the pandemic. After the outbreak of COVID-19, these COIL initiatives drew attention as a way to promote sustainable and inclusive international learning without mobility. Kansai University’s Institute for Innovative Global Education (IIGE) plays a leading role in disseminating the COIL method, with its resources and training programs, among universities in Japan and other countries via the IIGE Global Network.

Prospects and Challenges

According to the MEXT survey, 90 percent of the funded universities answered that they would in the future develop blended/hybrid international exchange programs, combining learning through physical mobility with learning via the internet. Except for the COIL initiative, current virtual exchanges and mobility are largely regarded as an emergency response to the current crisis and as alternative solutions to international learning through physical mobility. International educators are concerned that online international learning methods are likely to fade away when physical student mobility resumes on a larger scale. However, it is crucial for universities to leverage newly developed online learning tools even after the COVID-19 pandemic, to offer inclusive international education to the larger student pool who are unable to study abroad. Now is the time to reflect on the fact that international education policy and practice have excessively relied on physical cross-border mobility.

One of the challenges for Japanese universities in conducting online teaching and learning programs is to ensure and enhance quality. Considering the short history of online learning and distance education in Japan, both capacity building and professional development are critical to this end. Also, assessing the learning outcomes of students who participated in virtual exchange and mobility programs is indispensable, in order to determine the benefits and limitations of such programs and further improve them. These efforts can help universities envision an effective and inclusive approach to international teaching and learning in the post-COVID-19 era. Responding to the new normal requires that universities develop a new modality of internationalization, which will have a significant impact on the reputation and attractiveness of higher education as a whole. ▲

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