

Internationalisation of Japanese universities and the integration of students within the wider local community (Japan)

by Katrina Abatis, Welfare Officer (International), University of Leicester

Objective

Only 1.4% of Japan's population are designated as foreigners¹. During my own experience of living in Japan from 2004-2005 this fact seemed very noticeable in comparison to the UK. Integrating into Japanese society can be a daunting task for a foreigner. The issue of internationalisation is therefore vital to Japanese universities, who recognise the importance of integrating their international students into both the university and the local community rather than allowing them to feel marginalised. To achieve cross-cultural understanding it is important for universities to address this issue on a micro and a macro scale and to recognise that by successfully integrating their students into community life there can be benefits for all parties (the student, the community and the university). Internationalisation is a very current issue for many UK institutions and the challenges of implementing this on a university-wide scale should be carefully considered.

Destination and background

Japan may not seem an obvious choice of a country to visit, having an international student population of around 100,000 compared to the UK's main competitors, America and Australia. However, like the UK, the Japanese government has recognised the economic and cultural importance of international students and plans to increase the numbers to 300,000 by 2020. As a result of their 'Global 30' initiative, they are in the process of selecting twelve universities in Japan to be eligible for government funding. In addition the government provides scholarships for international students through JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization) and MEXT (Monbukagakusho, which is Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology).

During my visit to Japan I was kindly hosted by Waseda University in Tokyo and Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Beppu.

Waseda University

Waseda is located in the centre of Tokyo and was founded in 1882, which makes it one of Japan's oldest universities. The student population in 2008 was 53,801, which makes it the second largest university in Japan. It is one of the most attractive universities in Japan for international students with an international student population of 2,830 in 2008. The president of the university wishes to increase the population of international students to 8,000 within the next five years. Classes are taught both in Japanese and English.

During my visit to Waseda, I met staff at the Waseda Centre for International Education (CIE) and the International Community Centre (ICC). The CIE deals with Study Abroad applications, accommodation, visas, student health and other administrative matters. The ICC, founded in 2006, has been modelled on an initiative by Yonsei University in Seoul to provide activities and promote integration between international and home students and within the wider community.

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU)

¹ Figures obtained from Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

APU is located on the top of one of the mountains surrounding Japan's tourist resort of Beppu, famous for its natural hot springs. A new university, it opened in 2000, founded by Ritsumeikan Trust with co-operation from Oita Prefecture and Beppu City, who hoped to increase numbers of young people into an area with an ageing population. One of the institution's priorities is 'to contribute to the internationalization and revitalization of local communities'. To achieve this aim friendship exchange agreements have been facilitated with seven Japanese towns, public lectures are held and participation in local events is encouraged. Uniquely, almost half of APU's student population is international with 3,153 domestic students and 2,815 internationals. In addition, 40% of APU's staff are foreign nationals. Like Waseda, classes are taught in English and Japanese.

At APU I visited the Student Support Center, Academic Outreach Office, Careers Office and AP House. The Student Support Center is the hub of all student support and activities with a Student Activity Station (SAS), responsible for co-ordinating local exchanges and contribution. Staff there also advise on health and accommodation and organise orientation, camps and Activity Week. The Academic Outreach Office supervise all Study Abroad programmes and co-ordinate the Local Contribution Program and International Field Studies. The Careers Office runs a unique Global Leadership Program and AP House accommodates 1,310 new international and home students.

Outcomes

Both universities have devised a wide range of strategies for internationalisation and integration of their students within the local community. At Waseda this includes the purpose-built International Community Center and use of their students' Study Abroad experiences to deepen cultural understanding. APU was founded on the principle of community spirit and this ethos permeates its extra-curricular activities, curriculum and policy and makes it an excellent model for internationalisation with a strong focus on the local community. Key to this in both universities is encouraging and supporting the students in contributing and getting involved with these kinds of activities.

Key findings

Waseda University

- Center for International Education (CIE)

Waseda recognises that its Study Abroad Programmes provide an international experience for domestic students and that reciprocal agreements enable international students to experience Japan. They have approximately 800 outgoing students and 3,000 incoming students and hold large fairs twice a year to promote their activities. International students are actively involved in these events, speaking about their home institutions. Waseda recruits 30-50 volunteers annually (after their Study Abroad year) as 'Study Abroad Advisors'. The role of these advisers is to be: 'the connecting link between students who wish to study abroad, students who have already studied abroad and international students at Waseda'. They are involved in consultations and events throughout the year and tend to be more active because their own experience informs their activities.

The CIE also has some involvement in community projects. One example of this is a tree decoration project which has evolved into an annual three month project involving domestic students, international students and local residents, the aim being to increase cultural understanding. The initiative has been so successful that it now has high student participation, as well as support from the CIE and ICC.

- ICC

The ICC is an imaginative space which was developed as a collaborative project (by local community, faculty and alumni) to encourage cross-cultural exchange as it was recognised that Japanese and international students at Waseda did not have the chance to interact socially. The Center employs around six student staff and six full-time staff, who plan events, answer queries and assist in student projects. When I visited, the building contained a computer area, terrace, lounge for events, information area with local and international information as well as ten TV screens showing news programmes from around the world. Since my visit in March, the office has been moved to the heart of the main campus.

ICC staff organise home-stays and other exchange activities. They run a themed café (discussions over coffee) and a language hour. Their language exchange programme involves an orientation session to explain the process; this is followed by submission of an online application which allows staff to match the students. The first exchange takes place in the Center to ensure compatibility and establish ground rules.

It is recognised that students may have varying levels of language ability and every effort is made to accommodate this. Sports events are popular and music and dance societies perform at the Center on Friday evenings. Country festivals are organised by students and held over one to two weeks involving performances and the showcasing of various countries. The Center also runs field trips and camps; an interesting idea is the 'No Border Camp' in which a number of international and domestic students are selected randomly and asked not to reveal their nationality, real name, faculty or age to one another: the purpose being to encourage the students to get to know each other without stereotypes or prejudices.

The ICC also promotes involvement within the local community and regularly organises a clean-up project in the local area. Students are encouraged to go into primary, junior and senior high schools, where an international student will be paired with a local student to give a presentation. The Center works with JAPA (Japan Association for Performance Art) to promote traditional arts and holds dance lessons and other activities. Selected events are also open to the local community.

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU)

- Careers / Global Business Leaders Development Program (GBLP)

APU recognises that many international students want to work in Japan after graduation. However, key to finding and keeping a job is an understanding of the principles of working for a Japanese company. Courses at the university address these principles and due to the location of APU, which is some distance from the largest Japanese cities, approximately 400 employers are welcomed to the campus throughout the year for talks to students.

The GBLP is a career development programme exclusively for international students who take an internship with a Japanese company as part of their studies. It began in 2007 and is financed by Government funding which provides 26 third year students with a generous stipend. The initiative was founded to increase foreign talent in Japanese industries; these companies benefit as skilled international graduates will give them a competitive edge. APU literature explains: "The GBLP is aimed at those persons who, after utilizing their skills and widening their knowledge within the multicultural campus environment that constitutes APU, shall go on to seek careers

in Japanese industries immediately after graduating from APU, predominantly in the companies participating in the program”.

- Student Activity Station (SAS)

SAS was established to “allow more students to participate in extracurricular activities, provide opportunities and information, and support their activities”. This is another project within APU which has been subsidised by MEXT and will run for at least three years. It reflects one of APU’s strategic priorities as many of the projects initiate involvement with the local community. This involves students being recruited to go into local schools and give talks on their own country. Many students compete to be involved in the project as they see the benefit of gaining new skills and enjoy the chance to teach Japanese children about their own culture.

SAS has two strands – the ‘Local Exchange Program’ and the ‘Introduction of World Culture Program’. At the initial launch of SAS, APU staff met many local groups to determine collaborative projects. Some of these activities include organising local walks, events with community groups such as senior citizens, projects in schools, research in the community and promotion (T-shirts, newsletters, questionnaires).

SAS is also responsible for organising home-stays, Multicultural Week and assisting clubs and circles at the University. In all of these events students are encouraged to take a lead. The University receives approximately 300 requests from the local community each year for student assistance over events and this demonstrates their success.

- Multi-cultural Camp

The purpose of Multi-cultural Camp is to increase the interaction between domestic and international students taking different courses. Most Japanese students who choose to go to APU are aware of its reputation as an international university and expect to meet people from different cultures. For many students the reasons for selecting APU include improvement of language skills and broadening of cultural understanding but in reality they discover that integration can be challenging.

This two day camp caters for over 100 students with 17 camp leaders. Camp leaders are both Japanese and international students responsible for planning the camp activities that facilitate interaction (eg games and cooking together). Students who attend the camp are given a certificate which recognises their achievements.

- Multicultural Weeks

APU have nine multicultural events each term. The weeks are student/student society-led and provide the opportunity for students to showcase their home country. The principle is that during the week allocated to them, the students introduce their culture, arts, sports, cuisine etc. Events are often planned to coincide with languages which are being taught, for instance, Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese and Spanish during the first semester. Students are given a budget of 30,000 yen (approximately £200) and provided with support and training. This is a campus-wide project and the University canteen will serve national dishes during the week.

The highlight of each Week is the Friday evening performance, which typically has 200 performers/crew members and an audience of 1,000. The purpose of these events is: “taking advantage of APU’s students’ diversity and promoting the

understanding of various countries and regions". Students in the past have shown creativity in the events they choose to prepare and great initiative – one such event was attended by the Ambassador of Indonesia, whom the students invited to be present.

- Study Abroad

APU run a short-term programme called 'FIRST' (Freshman Intercultural Relations Study Trip) which is a unique chance for students to experience first-hand the challenges of orientation into a different culture. Each student is placed into a small group which has one teaching assistant (TA): a student native to the country they will be visiting. The TA provides a few lessons in the language and culture of the destination before the student leaves Japan, but this support is not extended into the study abroad period except in an emergency situation. This method forces students to rely on their own initiative to orientate themselves in an unfamiliar environment. APU literature explains: 'As a program rule groups must work together, without the help of instructors or TAs, to get to their designated cities, find accommodation and conduct research. One of the main features of this program is that it requires students to hone their sense of responsibility, and ability to act and make decisions while surrounded by a different language and culture.'

APU have run 32 Study Abroad programmes in the last year and hope to send all Japanese students abroad once in their four year study period in order that students experience international education first-hand.

- Curriculum

APU have extensive programmes of field study which are linked to courses in Management and Asia Pacific Studies and require students to examine international issues and perhaps travel as part of their course or to get involved with pertinent issues within the local community. Examples of some of these field trips include 'Protecting World Heritage through Tourism', 'Local Business Start-up in Malaysia and SME Start-up in Japan' and 'Beppu Revitalization: Sister City Experiences'.

Other courses within the University have a strong focus on the preservation of Beppu's local heritage. Staff at APU devised the 'Hot Spring Tourism Renaissance Program', described as: 'a curriculum that utilizes "student power" to contribute to local development'. As part of their first courses, students are taught an awareness of local issues and are later given a project topic to 'cooperate with local people in order to solve issues facing the region'. This course provides a mutual benefit for both APU students and the community.

- AP House

AP House is on-campus accommodation for APU students, again with the aim of integrating home and international students in a social setting. APU literature describes AP House as: 'an international dormitory where people from different countries and regions live together and practise their multicultural competence. Students improve their ability with foreign languages and intercultural communication through sharing their environment and making friends with people from different cultural backgrounds'.

To facilitate this aim there are in-house programmes and Residential Assistants (RAs) who are senior international and home students who offer pastoral care as well as organising social activities in the accommodation. In addition, AP House has a

shared room facility where new domestic and international students live together in two separate rooms with a retractable partition wall. Within the accommodation linguistic ability is developed with alternate days where students are required to speak in English or Japanese.

Reflections

After examining the models of Waseda and APU I feel that the University of Leicester could benefit by actively encouraging students to be more involved in cultural and community activities. The University already has a Cultural Night during our International Students' Welcome Programme, the International Students' Association organise cultural events and the Chinese Society celebrate Chinese New Year, but these events tend to attract a majority of international students. However, the opportunity exists to develop the ideas from Multicultural Week at APU to involve the whole institution in events which focus on a particular country, with displays, talks, performances, information in electronic and printed form, food events etc.

Within this celebration of culture the University could also encourage involvement of the local community, which is very ethnically diverse. These cultural events would contribute to internationalising the University through increased understanding and promotion of interaction between students. Other UK institutions run similar events, but the scale of events run by Japanese universities eg Multicultural Week and the Waseda Christmas Illumination Project seem particularly successful because they are promoted by the University as a whole. Both universities recruit volunteers to help co-ordinate the event and those who are not involved directly often become involved as a spectator.

It would be useful to create a focus group of active international students who may be able to take a lead in some of these events. There may also be a chance to develop these activities on a smaller scale in university accommodation (for instance in Leicester we have an 'Arts in the Village' programme within accommodation which could be developed to include national music and dance performances/competitions etc).

Not many UK universities currently consider pairing international and home students like AP House, but this could be considered in the allocation process with the prospective student being given the opportunity to select this type of living arrangement.

Most UK institutions have Student Community Action volunteer projects who have links within the local community and may be able to run similar projects as APU and Waseda have done in local schools with international students teaching children about their home countries.

The benefits of fostering links with local communities are evident in this study. Universities with the financial means may even consider building a cross-cultural community centre as Waseda have done. Other institutions may be able to integrate community awareness into their curriculum (particularly in UK hotspots for tourism) as APU have done.

Reflections on national policy issues

Waseda and APU are both private universities meaning that their funding streams differ from UK institutions. Both universities also receive government awards for projects that promote cross-cultural understanding and address community issues,

which the Japanese government appears to actively encourage. In addition, Japanese students pay the same level of tuition fees as international students and many international students receive scholarships such as MEXT and JASSO which produces a perception of financial equality. When compared to the UK, Japanese society is not as multi-cultural, therefore incentives to promote multiculturalism and to encourage English language speaking may be considered as a priority.

In addition, international student orientation at both universities I visited serves a mainly administrative purpose eg 'alien' registration and health registration. Therefore, it could be argued that planned ongoing opportunities for interaction are considered more effective than the short input provided in the UK. Adoption of the Japanese system could enhance long-term student satisfaction in UK institutions.

Issues for the future

Further topics of study that arose from this study could be an investigation into creating a cultural exchange centre by exploring international comparisons eg Yonsei University in Seoul, which is the model for Waseda's ICC.

Study Abroad staff in UK institutions may want to explore APU's FIRST model and develop new short term programmes that develop cultural awareness for more UK home students.

Careers staff or faculty members in relevant subject areas may be interested to develop a programme such as the GBLP, although there would need to be an equivalent source of UK funding to make the project a success.

In addition, there is scope for universities to look into providing courses which recognise cultural or global issues and co-operate with an external agency such as a local council to enhance the learning experience for all students.