

## ASIEN AKTUELL

# The Internationalization of Japanese Universities: English-Mediated Courses as the Key to Success

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### Summary

Efforts to attract more foreign students have been driving higher-education reform in Japan for decades. In 2008, the Japanese government announced its aim of reaching 300,000 international students by 2020 with the launch of its 300,000 International Students Plan. Under the scheme, the government has been providing funding for selected core universities in an initiative called the Global 30 Project. Many of the country's universities have consequently implemented degree programs held in English. This paper examines the growing number of international students in Japan and analyzes the impact that English-mediated courses have had on this increase. As the analysis shows, the growth in the number of international students at universities with a comprehensive range of such courses is significantly higher than at other universities, indicating that the use of English as a language of instruction may be a useful strategy for making Japanese universities more viable and internationally competitive.

**Keywords:** English courses, Global 30, higher education, international students, internationalization, Japanese universities

### Introduction

In response to globalization and efforts to make societies more knowledge-based, Japan has been implementing measures under its 300,000 International Students Plan to increase the number of international students in its tertiary institutions. One of these measures, known as the Global 30 Project, is a government initiative designed to internationalize thirty core Japanese universities by promoting English-mediated courses to attract more international students. In addition to their existing short-term programs, universities designated by the government have also established English-language degree programs with the aim of attracting greater numbers of international students. This paper examines the developments since the introduction of the 300,000 International Students Plan and takes a closer look at the impact of English-mediated courses on the number of international students enrolling in educational programs in Japan. My analysis is based on data compiled by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), which records the number of international

students at Japanese universities every year. As the analysis shows, the number of international students that have enrolled so far is still well below the government's target of 300,000, but the implementation of more English-mediated courses would increase the likelihood of achieving this goal.

### The 300,000 International Students Plan

In July 2008, six ministries including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) jointly launched a basic framework designed to accept up to 300,000 international students by the year 2020. With this target as its focal point, the framework is comprised of five main measures, which are part of a "global strategy" to open Japan up to the rest of the world and expand the flow of people, goods, money, and information between Japan and other regions (MEXT 2008):

- Inviting students to study in Japan and developing one-stop services (e.g., proactively disseminating information and improving advisory functions)
- Facilitating university study in Japan (e.g., improving accessibility of entrance examinations and easing enrollment and immigration processes)
- Promoting the globalization of universities (e.g., developing thirty universities as centers for internationalization and increasing the number of courses taught in English)
- Creating a more welcoming environment for students (e.g., assisting with accommodation, offering scholarships, and promoting exchanges between international and Japanese students)
- Offering assistance to international graduates (e.g., providing follow-up and career services after graduation and extending the length of permitted stays).

The target of 300,000 international students initially declared by former Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda is believed to have been designed to maintain the current share of Japanese higher education in the international student market (Yonezawa 2011). Japan's current share of all the international students in the world is approximately five percent, and 300,000 international students in 2020 is the figure forecast to be around five percent of all international students globally in that year (Shao 2008).

According to JASSO (2013), there were 137,000 international students in Japan in 2012, which is about four percent of the total number of students in the country (approximately three million; MEXT 2012). If Japanese institutions of higher education are to secure a level of foreign student enrollment similar to that of other developed nations, this percentage will have to be increased substantially. For example, equivalent figures in Germany and France are around twelve percent respectively. A similar level of ten percent in Japan would be equivalent to roughly 300,000 international students from the national total of three million.

Clearly, the current number of international students in Japan is well below the level targeted by the government. Meanwhile, despite the ongoing contraction of the undergraduate age cohort, the number of Japanese universities has increased significantly over the years, rising from 507 in 1990 to 783 in 2012. During this period, the number of private universities rose dramatically from 372 to 605, making up 77.3 percent of all universities in Japan (MEXT 2012). A consequence of this increase, however, is that many private universities cannot meet admission quotas and are faced with the possibility of bankruptcy and closing down. Furthermore, private and national research-oriented universities are compelled to improve and maintain their positions in national and global rankings in order to ensure their influence and reputation in knowledge creation and dissemination and to attract talented students and scholars from all over the world (Kudo and Hashimoto 2011). To be able to compete nationally and globally, Japanese universities must therefore enroll more international students at a faster pace than in the past.

### **The Global 30 Project**

After the 300,000 International Students Plan was announced in 2008, the total number of international students in Japan gradually rose from around 123,000 to 137,000 in 2012 (see figure 1). At this rate, the total number of international students to have enrolled by 2020 would be around 165,000, little more than half the target of 300,000.

Given these results, the question remains as to what can be done to achieve this ambitious goal. The current approach reflected in the five measures proposed by the government ministries is to develop universities as centers for internationalization. In this regard, a fifteen-billion-yen (about 110 million euro) initiative called the Global 30 Project has been put into place to select and internationalize thirty core universities (Burgess 2010). After the introduction of this project, thirteen universities (seven public and six private) were chosen as core universities in 2009. These universities have been increasing the number of degree programs offered in English and participating in study-abroad fairs and other public relations activities outside Japan in order to attract potential overseas students.

The Global 30 Project represents a turning point in the internationalization of Japanese universities. Prior to this initiative, Japan felt that it had a responsibility to the international community to accept more international students, in particular from Asian countries, because it was the only developed country in the region, it had the largest economy in Asia, and it was one of the world's major economic powers. Accordingly, the government launched a plan in 1983 to increase the number of international students from 10,000 at that time to 100,000 students by the year 2000. In contrast, however, the country has adopted a proactive, self-interested approach since 2008, incorporating the Global 30 Project into its "national strategy" in relation to its economic development, restructuring of its social fabric, and efforts

toward globalization. Japan is now attempting to recruit high-quality international students in a wide variety of ways (Shao 2008).

Over the course of these activities, the quality of international students coming to Japan has become a serious concern. Although quantitative targets set in 1983 were achieved in 2003, the government did not achieve its qualitative goals to the degree anticipated (Arimoto 2010). Specifically, the 1983 plan aimed for a breakdown of thirty percent of students in Master's and PhD programs, sixty percent in undergraduate programs, and ten percent at vocational colleges. In contrast, of the total number of international students in 2007, for example (118,000), 27 percent were Master's or PhD students, 52 percent were undergraduate students, nineteen percent were vocational college students, and two percent were enrolled in university preparatory courses (see Shao 2008). Given such results, the Japanese government also addressed the issue of student quality in 2008 in its new plan to recruit 300,000 international students by 2020.

### **The introduction of English-mediated courses**

To increase the number of incoming international students, serious efforts have been made in the development and implementation of programs designated for international students. An increasing number of universities are offering courses partially or fully taught in English, particularly in postgraduate programs in the natural sciences and management studies, but also in short-term undergraduate programs that have mainly been developed for the purpose of accepting international students from diverse countries who have little or no prior experience in learning Japanese, especially students from English-speaking countries (Kudo and Hashimoto 2011). Furthermore, since the introduction of the Global 30 Project, the top universities in Japan have all been offering degree programs in English. All thirteen universities selected for the project now offer a wide range of full degree programs at graduate and undergraduate level. Nagoya University (NU), for example, currently offers eighteen full degree programs entirely taught in English. Along with its strong focus on postgraduate education, NU also offers five undergraduate programs in natural and social sciences (see table 1).

**Tab. 1: English-language degree programs offered at Nagoya University**

Name of the Courses	Name of the Schools / Graduate Schools	Degrees Offered		
		Bachelor	Master	Doctor
Automotive Engineering Program	School of Engineering	♦		
Fundamental and Applied Physics Program	School of Engineering	♦		
Chemistry Program	School of Science	♦		
Biological Science Program		♦		
Program in Social Sciences	School of Law / School of Economics	♦		
Physics and Mathematics Graduate Program	Graduate School of Science / Graduate School of Mathematics		♦	♦
Chemistry Graduate Program			♦	♦
Biological and Bioagricultural Sciences Graduate Program			♦	
Medical Science Graduate Program	Graduate School of Medicine			♦
Graduate Program in Economics and Business Administration	Graduate School of Economics		♦	
Graduate Program in Comparative Studies of Language and Culture	Graduate School of Languages and Cultures		♦	
International Development and Cooperation Course	Graduate School of International Development		♦	♦
Program in Law and Political Science LL.D (Comparative Law)	Graduate School of Law		♦	♦
Young Leaders' Program (YLP) (Healthcare Administration Course of Master's Degree Program)	Graduate School of Medicine		♦	
The Forefront Studies Program for Civil Engineering	Graduate School of Engineering			♦
Nagoya University Global Environmental Leaders Program	Graduate School of Environmental Studies		♦	
Special Doctoral Graduate Program of Sciences of Atmosphere and Hydrosphere for International Students [sic]				

Source: Nagoya University, 2013

By expanding the programs offered in English, the thirteen universities have been breaking down the Japanese language barrier, which has been one of the obstacles preventing international students from studying in this country. NU states the following as its own strategic measure to increase the number of international students it has:

To lead Japan's universities toward internationalization, Nagoya University must transform itself into a "university of the world." This means building a new environment in which Japanese and international students work side by side. In this way, the high standards of undergraduate and graduate education Nagoya University has achieved will be more widely accessible to students from overseas, and the University will be able to educate individuals with the ability to interact on the world stage.<sup>1</sup>

Besides English-mediated courses, this new learning environment also includes short-term student exchange programs and Japanese language education programs. These programs can be categorized into two groups depending on their duration and content. One group comprises one-year programs covering subjects in the humanities, social science, natural science, and other fields, with credits of thirty units being conferred upon completion. The other group is made up of four- to twelve-month courses almost entirely provided in the humanities and social science sector (Huang 2006).

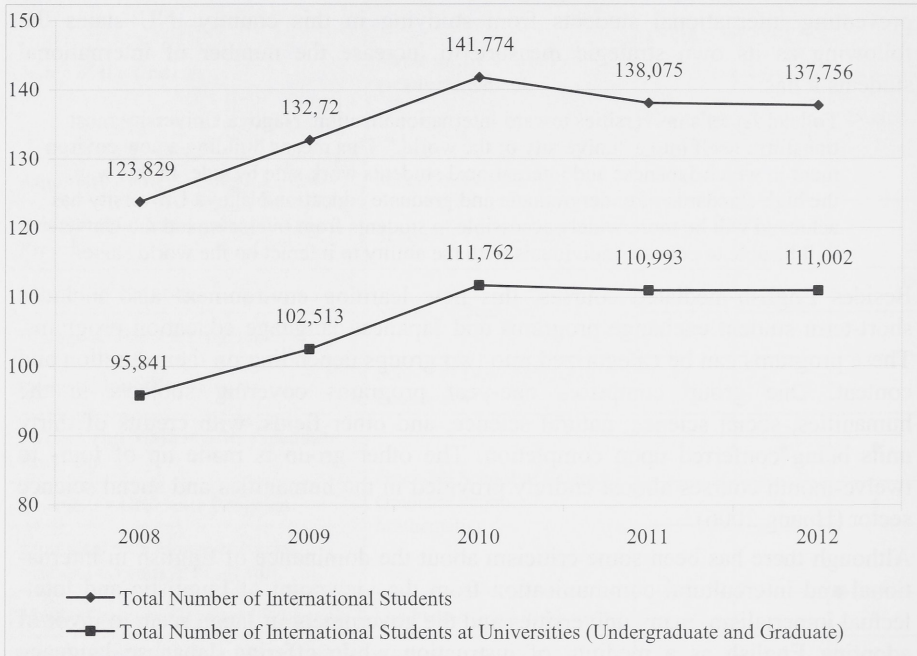
Although there has been some criticism about the dominance of English in international and intercultural communication from the viewpoint of linguistic and intellectual imperialism, many universities and the government in Japan seem in favor of adopting English as a medium of instruction while offering Japanese language programs for incoming international students (see Kudo and Hashimoto 2011). The Japanese government's strategy of insisting on the use of English at universities has multiple purposes. International programs using English are especially aimed at attracting international students and are designed to internationalize universities in Japan. The Japanese government also believes that using English at universities and adopting an American model of evaluation and coursework will facilitate partnerships with overseas institutions (Jon and Kim 2011).

### **The impact of English-mediated courses on the number of international students**

With the implementation of the 300,000 International Students Plan in 2008, the total number of international students in Japan increased from 123,829 that year to 137,756 in 2012, an increase of around eleven percent (JASSO 2013). Of that amount, the total number of international students at universities (in both undergraduate and graduate programs) increased from 95,841 in 2008 to 111,002 in 2012, a significantly higher increase of about sixteen percent.

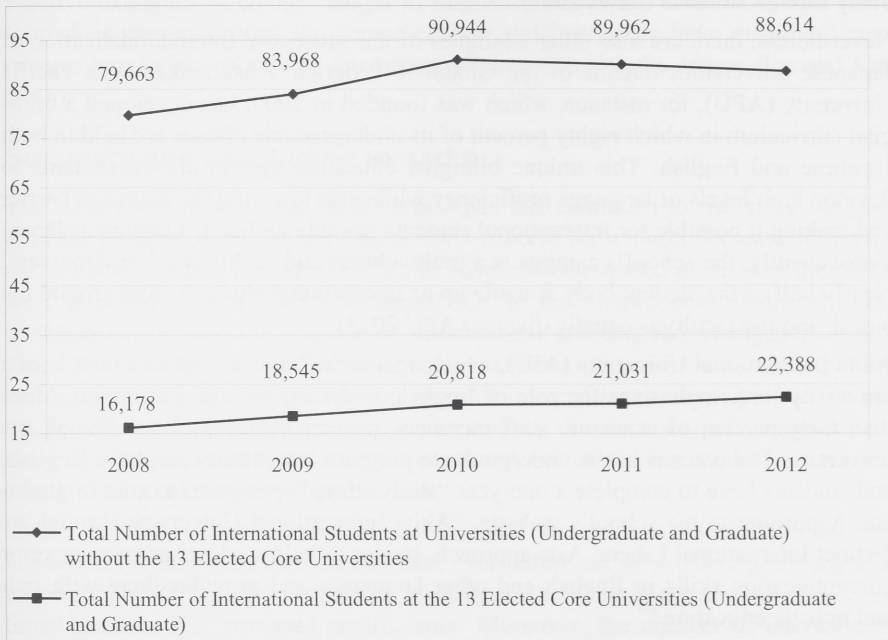
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1 "Nagoya University," [www.uni.international.mext.go.jp/university\\_list/nagoya/Activities/Index/](http://www.uni.international.mext.go.jp/university_list/nagoya/Activities/Index/) (accessed: 2013-11-27)

**Fig. 1: Total number of international students**

Source: JASSO 2013

The remaining twenty percent of international students consists of students enrolled in specialized training colleges and university preparatory courses. In 2011, the year of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the total number of international students dropped by about 2.6 percent, while the number of international students at universities remained almost unchanged, returning to the same level a year later. As this shows, worries that foreign students at universities would abandon Japan following the earthquake and resultant nuclear accident were largely unfounded. Moreover, the significantly higher increase in the number of international students at universities and the fact that the disaster had less influence on these students than on students at other institutions indicate that the Global 30 Project has been effective in promoting the growth of international students at universities. To measure the degree that the introduction of English-mediated courses has been a factor, the increase in the number of international students at the thirteen universities selected for the Global 30 Project should be compared separately from the number of international students at universities outside the project. This is shown below in figure 2.

**Fig. 2: Total number of international students under the Global 30 Project**

Source: JASSO 2013

While the number of international students at non-designated universities increased by about eleven percent from 79,663 in 2008 to 88,614 in 2012, the number at the thirteen core universities increased from 16,178 in 2008<sup>2</sup> to 22,388 in 2012, a significantly higher rate of about 38 percent. From 2011 onwards, the number of international students at universities outside the Global 30 Project actually decreased, while the number at the thirteen core universities continued to increase sharply despite the Great East Japan Earthquake. This clearly shows that the introduction of English-mediated courses has had a strong effect on attracting international students. It also demonstrates how government-initiated policies can play an important role in internationalizing higher education in Japan.

To propel this increase further, it will be necessary to increase the number of universities participating in the Global 30 Project. With only the current thirteen universities participating at the moment, it does not appear to be possible to achieve the aim

2 The number of international students from Doshisha University was not available for 2008 and is not included in this figure. According to the increase in the number of international students from 2009 to 2010, about 400 international students can be estimated for Doshisha University in 2008, which would only slightly affect the increase, it dipping from 38 to 36 percent.



of 300,000 international students by the year 2020. Moreover, cuts to scholarships and the budget for the project are also affecting the government's plan to attract this many foreign students (Sawa 2013).

Nevertheless, there are also other examples of the successful internationalization of Japanese universities outside of the Global 30 Program. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), for instance, which was founded in 2000, has developed a bilingual curriculum in which eighty percent of its undergraduate classes are held in both Japanese and English. This unique bilingual education system allows students to develop high levels of language proficiency while also lowering the language barrier and making it possible for international students to study and earn a degree in Japan. Consequently, the school's campus is a multicultural and multilingual environment. Nearly half of the student body is made up of international students from around the world, and the faculty is equally diverse (APU 2013).

Akita International University (AIU), which opened in 2004, is another example of a university that emphasizes the role of English as the medium of instruction. More than forty percent of academic staff members are non-Japanese at this liberal arts university. The courses in the undergraduate program are entirely taught in English, and students have to complete a one-year "study abroad" program in order to graduate. According to the school's website, "Akita International University, through its distinct International Liberal Arts approach, strives to help students acquire superior communication skills in English and other languages and provides them with rich and holistic education."<sup>3</sup>

With the increasing opportunities for intercultural encounters and the emergence of discourses centered on globalization and multiculturalism, the need to nurture the intercultural competence of young people in Japan is growing. The establishment of universities with an intercultural focus like APU and AIU in the last ten years reflects this. Although these universities are not prominent centers of research listed in global rankings, they do provide valuable opportunities for intercultural contact and overseas study as part of their degree programs.

Multinational campuses in Japan do face problems and challenges, of course. With few exceptions, English is still new to contemporary Japanese universities as a language of instruction, and the standard of education in English is a cause of concern at some institutions due to the limited language competence of local students as well as international students and teachers with non-English-speaking backgrounds (see Kudo and Hashimoto 2011). In response to this, more and more universities have started to recruit foreign professors, with APU and Akita International University at the forefront of this trend. Nonetheless, in addition to increasing the number of faculty members who speak English, universities also need to improve the teaching

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3 "Akita International University Philosophy," <http://web.aiu.ac.jp/en/about/philosophy> (accessed: 2013-11-22).

and advising skills of faculty as well as their level of English, and provide training on intercultural communication to both Japanese faculty and international students. Positive examples of courses taught in English indicate that students benefit when English is appropriate for the course content and instructors have made sufficient preparations to incorporate an international dimension into the course (Jon and Kim 2011).

### **Summary and concluding remarks**

The number of international students in Japan has continued to rise since the government introduced related policies in 1983 (except for a slight decrease following the Great East Japan Earthquake). While government-initiated policies in the 1980s were intended to fulfill Japan's commitment to the international community, the intention to increase the number of international students has changed in recent years. Because the undergraduate age cohort is shrinking amidst an increasing number of universities and competition among elite universities is intensifying as a result of globalization, the government now recognizes the necessity of increasing the number of international students to secure a level of foreign student enrollment similar to that of other developed nations.

Owing to the implementation of the 300,000 International Students Plan and Global 30 Project, more universities than ever before are now offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs in English, and as a result, the number of international students has increased significantly. Moreover, the number of international students at the thirteen core universities participating in the Global 30 Project has grown at a much higher rate than at non-participating schools, indicating that the introduction of English-mediated courses has had a major impact on attracting students from abroad. With only thirteen government-supported universities, however, the aim of attracting 300,000 international students by 2020 appears difficult to achieve. Therefore, more universities offering degree programs in English and short-term exchange programs will be needed to attract a greater number of students from outside Japan.

Meanwhile, outside of the Global 30 Project, degree programs in English have been successfully implemented at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University and Akita International University, both of which have changed the language of instruction to English for most of their courses. In the case of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, the number of international students has grown to almost half of the student body.

These cases provide a valuable solution for universities faced with the possibility of bankruptcy and closure due to falling enrollment figures. By introducing English degree programs to attract more international students, such institutions may be able to offset the decline in the number of local students they are seeing. Moreover, these programs can serve to attract talented scholars from all over the world, thereby

improving the global competitiveness of their universities. It is, of course, a major undertaking to design and implement English-language degree programs and English-mediated courses, hire more international academics, and prepare Japanese faculty for such changes. Nevertheless, the challenges involved in this process are far outweighed by the direct impact of expanding the student body and by the broader benefits that come from having a thriving, internationalized university that is better equipped to compete globally in terms of education and research.

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