

Inspiring a Global Perspective among Japanese Youth

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Introduction:

“Japan’s youth face competition from those across the globe. Japanese young people shoulder the future of the country. In order for them to win in global competitions, and to play active roles on the world stage in areas such as academic research, culture, and to make contributions in the international scene, it is an urgent matter to raise the level of education up to international standards.”

(Office of the Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet Office, 2014)

In support of the Japanese Government’s initiative for developing its “Global Resources” (“global *jinzai*”), this essay highlights the need for young Japanese people to acquire knowledge, experience and language skills outside of their home country in order to benefit themselves and their economy in a rapidly globalising environment.

Given that China, Korea and India now actively support and encourage the movement of their young people abroad for education purposes (a trend in which Japan lags significantly) (Oliver 2014), Japan risks losing its ‘competitive edge’ in a world where conducting successful business depends more than ever on the ability to communicate in a second language. Moreover, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games will present both a valuable opportunity for Japan to show-case its culture and technology to the world, and a challenge to provide skilled linguists in areas such as media, hospitality, transportation and public services to ensure it success.

Firstly, this essay provides an overview of the situation and the government efforts to encourage Japanese youth to go abroad in pursuit of a ‘global experience.’ It also examines constraining factors working against these efforts, such as the *uchimuki* (‘insular’ or ‘inward-looking’) phenomenon, poor job prospects and the fears and inadequacies which have manifested themselves in the

growing reluctance of youth to travel abroad.

Secondly, and in direct response to the aforementioned, this essay proposes an essential and targeted approach to inspire and motivate young people of high school and university-age to take advantage of the opportunities which lie beyond their shores. The author outlines his research project entitled “Inspiring a Global Perspective” in which ‘real life’ storytelling – presented as a series of film-documented stories of young Japanese who have benefitted from their overseas experience – will be used to deliver a positive message to a similarly youthful audience. Research methodologies and their results to date, as well as a prototype case study, are presented later on.

Finally, this essay does not seek to analyse Japan’s greater economic situation or the governmental policies shaping it, but rather show how young people, through acquiring communication skills and cultural knowledge beyond their shores, may reap benefits and contribute to their country’s future.

Situation Overview

In 2014, approximately 25% of the Japanese population was aged 65 years or older according to government figures. (BBC Asia 2015). Coupled with a steadily declining number of working-age people, attributed to lower birth rates (ibid.), the problem of how to increase the nation’s population remains a pressing one. To a certain degree it has overshadowed another pressing concern: how to maintain global competitiveness. “There is an awareness that Japan’s competitiveness is falling and that we need a more global workforce,” says Kazunori Masugo, head of Senri International School in western Japan (Yonezawa 2014). The issue has been picked up by the foreign media with headlines proclaiming “Fewer Japanese Students Studying Abroad” (New York Times, 2011) and “The Choices For Japanese Youth: Japan’s Generation Y at the Crossroads” (Forbes 2013). Hiroko Tabuchi, of TIME magazine, sums up the problem: “A shrinking portion of Japanese college graduates is seeking higher education in the West. At the same time, Japan’s rivals, including China, Korea and India, are sending increasing numbers of students overseas.” (Tabuchi 2012)

“Global Human Resources” have become buzzwords among policy-makers, and not just the mass media. A report released by the Government Council on Promotion of Human Resources for Globalisation Development (2012) defines

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“Global *Jinzai*” as people with:

- linguistic and communication skills
- self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission
- an understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese

(Yonezawa 2014)

To increase “global jinzai”, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), working within its budgeting policies framework for FY2014, launched the “Super Global University Project.” This initiative seeks to enhance international competitiveness, develop Global Human Resources, offer motivated Japanese youths opportunities to study abroad, and increase the number of Japanese university students abroad to 120,000 by 2020. (ibid.)

While initiatives like this show that the Government is making efforts to tackle the issue, tangible results take time to appear and in the meantime the conundrum persists: how to inspire and motivate the youth of today to seek knowledge, skills and experience abroad?

Constraints

“Notoriously insular, corporate Japan has long been wary of embracing Western-educated compatriots who return home.” (Tabuchi 2012). Observations like this hint at reasons for the decline in numbers of young Japanese seeking education and experience overseas.

Despite the need for Japanese companies to expand their global reach by using “internationally savvy talent” (Tanikawa, 2011), suspicion of Western education and business practices makes entry into the workforce difficult for overseas-educated graduates. “Critics say the reluctance to tap the international experience of these young people is a growing problem for Japan as some its major industries—like banking, consumer electronics and automobiles—lose ground in an increasingly global economy.” (Tabuchi 2012). Traditional hiring methods such as *shukatsu*, in which graduates are hired directly from universities, and which favour Japanese-educated graduates over overseas ones, may be construed as dissuasive to those seeking to study abroad. Tabuchi quotes Ryutaro Sakamoto, a graduate of University of Toronto: “In Japan, taking the time to study overseas

sets you back in the *shukatsu* race.” (ibid.)

Shifting attitudes of youth themselves may be also to blame, according to Naoki Ogi, professor of education at Hosei University in Tokyo, “Young Japanese are increasingly becoming introverted and risk averse, and are unwilling and ill-prepared to take on new challenges. He added that he believed their lack of interest in going abroad was part of that growing unease with the unknown and the challenging.” (Tanikawa 2011)

Worries concerning English-language ability, financial situation, family obligations, and more recently, terrorism, are also driving this averseness to overseas travel. Lynda Gratton, in her Forbes article “The Choices for Japanese Youth: Japan’s Generation Y at the Crossroads”, is more pointed, suggesting the problem lies in an inherent lack of communication skills and states that “the inability of many to read English marginalizes the possibilities for global connection.” (Gratton 2013). However, Noritoshi Furuichi, in his article “The Fragile Happiness of Japan’s Insular Youth” (East Asia Forum 2014), posits that many young people simply feel more comfortable staying at home: “When measuring happiness and life satisfaction, the basis has shifted from society and politics, ‘public and wider things’, to ‘friends’ and ‘hometown’—things that are in one’s immediate world. The *uchimuki* (‘insular’ or inward-looking’) phenomenon is not necessarily due to lack of interest in leaving Japan or one’s immediate world, but may also reflect high levels of *present contentment*—a consequence of the wider well-off socio-economic situation of Japan.” (ibid.)

To a lesser degree, the Japanese media compounds this problem by trivialising the ‘global experience’ and presents travel abroad as an entertainment or an escapist experience. Programs such as “Sekai no Nihonjin-zuma wa mita” (“What the World’s Japanese Wife saw”) or “Sekai naze soko ni Nihonjin” (“Why in the World here Japanese?”) exemplify this. Furthermore, Japan’s strong work ethic, which tends to perceive overseas travel for non-business purposes as a luxury rather than a necessity, may also in part support this mindset.

Inspiring a Global Perspective: A Research Project

In direct response to the Japanese Government’s cited need (Provisional Paper for the Concept of Growth Strategy, Office of the Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, 2014) to increase its Global Human Resources, a research project

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entitled “Inspiring a Global Perspective” was begun by this author in 2014.

Driven by the research question, *How to inspire Japanese youth to seek a 'global experience'?* this project explores the reasons why fewer younger Japanese are travelling abroad and proposes a plan of action which utilises DVD/digital media to deliver its message.

‘Storytelling’ is the essence of this presentation. The author has begun a search for unique personal stories of Japanese people who are living, studying or working abroad (or who have lived, studied and worked abroad) and which can be told in a documentary-style format. This will draw on a series of five or more interviews, conducted in English and subtitled in Japanese, and will provide a balanced but ultimately positive message about the benefits of travelling abroad. The rationale behind this is to address negative perceptions with positive personal stories and disseminate the research through website and documentary (DVD/digital) formats to high schools, colleges and universities throughout Japan. Digital platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, to which the film can be uploaded, will also be utilized in order to reach maximum viewers with minimum difficulty.

Research and Methodologies

Initial research began in June 2014, and sought to gauge the attitudes of young people towards key areas of inquiry: (i) English language acquisition, (ii) travelling abroad and (iii) future work prospects. This was completed using a simple ten-question survey which was administered using the online platform SurveyMonkey.com and disseminated to 200 students across four universities (Kyushu University, Himeji Dokkyo University, Kwansei Gakuin University and Matsuyama University in Shikoku). Respondees were asked to rate the following:

- enjoyment of studying English
- confidence in communicating in English
- future ambitions/plans to use English in work or travel
- basic fears and anxieties of working and/or travelling abroad

Initial findings showed similarities between the views and trends expressed in the foreign and Japanese English-language news media, namely, that there exists a reluctance by youth to travel abroad due to concerns about finance, leaving

family, health, safety and an inability to communicate in a foreign language.

To gauge in greater detail these attitudes, an essay topic entitled “What Worries Me About The Future” was offered to third-year foreign language majors at Himeji Dokkyo University. Whilst a number of these students aspire to be tour guides, café or restaurant owners, or work as staff in other areas of hospitality such as hotels and airports once they graduate, the worries and fears expressed in their writing about their English language ability, support the survey data.

A sample:

- “I want to start a sushi restaurant or a ramen shop in New York City, but I am worried about my listening and speaking skills.” (Ikuru 2014)
- “When I was an elementary school student I wanted to live in a foreign country. I still want to, but I feel my English is too poor.” (Shun 2014)
- “The reason I started studying English was to talk with people from other countries. To be honest, I would rather be travelling the world than studying in school.” (Iori 2014)
- “I am not sure about my future. My hometown is very rural, so if I can’t become an English teacher I will have to be a fisherman.” (Tsubura 2014)
- “First, I have to find a dream and then work hard to make it happen.” (Misaki 2014)
- “Our native teachers can understand my poor English, but in practice, when I travel overseas, local people cannot understand. I feel there is a reality gap in my studies.” (Chika 2014)

A Prototype Interview: Hirofumi Murakami

With initial research completed, it became clear that a Japanese person with the ability to both speak from experience and in a way which would resonate with a youthful audience would be required. A set of criteria were thus devised and a search for individuals who could satisfy these requirements began in August 2014. The criteria were:

1. Have resided (or are residing), studied or travelled in an English-speaking country
2. Have undergone a personal ‘transformation’ or professional development as a

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result of their overseas experience

3. Offers a high 'level of appeal' and/or entertainment value to a youth audience of subject's story
4. Can articulate their views clearly and in a way likely to inspire and motivate a youth audience
5. Are accessible to the researcher

Hirofumi Murakami, a former English major of Himeji Dokkyo University (1994-1997) and aged 37, met these criteria. Mr Murakami presently owns and manages a cafe-restaurant and AirBnB (internet-listed) guesthouse in Onomichi, Hiroshima prefecture. Through this enterprise he has sought to bridge the cultural divide between Japanese and overseas travellers by making available to them traditional-style accommodation at a nominal cost and creating an atmosphere conducive to cultural exchange.

In an interview, Mr Murakami explained that his motivations to "explore" beyond his own country's borders were due to his disillusionment with Japanese society, its homogeneous expectations and pressures to conform in education and employment fields (Murakami 2015). He said that he chose to 'opt out' of this mindset and to pursue his interest in world music and passion for foreign culture. Since graduating in 1997, he has visited over ten countries including culturally diverse, Malaysia, Italy and Turkey. In Berlin, where he resided for two years, he undertook various jobs including cooking Japanese food, acting in movies and creating a Japanese-themed lounge bar, or "meeting place" which combined his ideas for promoting cultural exchange and music sharing.

In much the same way as chado (tea ceremony) promotes harmony and well-being between people, Mr. Murakami hopes to do similarly with his hospitality business. To a large extent, he feels these experiences have helped him build his enterprise and that his time spent abroad has enabled him to find a practical application for both his English language skills and his business acumen.

Mr. Murakami says, "As your world gets bigger, your problems get smaller." *ibid.* This project seeks candidates who, through filmed interviews, can convey a similarly positive attitude to life.

Once suitable candidates have been chosen based on the five criteria listed above, they will be observed and filmed in their natural setting with emphasis

placed on the following:

- *Aesthetic merit*: Presenting the audio-visual material in an aesthetically appealing manner
- *Reflexivity*: Ensuring that the information is presented objectively
- *Impact*: Interpreting data from the ethnography to create material that is emotionally and intellectually stimulating
- *Expresses a reality*: Creating a credible account of cultural, social and the individual reality experienced by the interviewee
- *Substantive contribution*: Contributing to the understanding of the interviewees' social-life

Finally, findings by social scientists, Tuukka Toivonen, Vinai Norasakkunit and Yukiko Uchida, put forth in their paper "Unable to conform, unwilling to rebel? Youth Culture and motivation in globalising Japan" (Toivonen, Norasakkunit, Uchida 2011) are of special interest to this project since they pose the unique question, "It is possible to adapt to Japanese society by being a "cool maverick" - defined as a "group that adapts in creative and integrative (or "cool") ways by negotiating conformist pressures tactfully." (ibid.) This author intends to put forth a similar question to the chosen subjects of this multi-media presentation, in the hope that their answers will yield useful advice for their youth audience, and anyone else who hopes to "utilize global influences without being defeated by conformist pressures." (ibid.)

Conclusion:

Among Japan's most pressing concerns for the future is the need to lift its competitiveness in the global arena. Despite Government initiatives to date, it is clear that there needs to do more done to achieve this goal. Clearly, and as Japan's neighbours are already doing, inspiring and motivating its youth to seek experience and education abroad should be made a priority.

This essay provided an overview of a research project which, while still in its early stages, seeks to achieve this goal. Over time, and with greater resources, it is hoped that a more in-depth study can be made of young people's needs, hopes and dreams for the future; the results of which, will help to 'fine tune' this

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project.

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Abstract:

This essay examines the reasons for the steady decline in the number of Japanese youth travelling abroad for education purposes. Firstly, it provides an overview of the situation and the government efforts currently being made to reverse this trend. Factors working against these efforts, such as the *uchimuki* ('in sular' or 'inward-looking') phenomenon, poor job prospects, and the fears and inadequacies which have manifested themselves in the growing reluctance of youth to travel abroad, are also outlined. Secondly, this essay proposes an approach to inspire and motivate young people of high school and university-age to take advantage of the opportunities which lie beyond Japan's shores. The author outlines his research project, entitled "Inspiring a Global Perspective", in which 'real life' storytelling – presented as a series of film-documented stories about young Japanese who have benefitted from their overseas experience – will be used to deliver a positive message to a similarly youthful audience. Research methodologies and their results to date are also presented.