

A case study on increasing enrollment for private Japanese universities: intensive recruitment of foreign students outside Asia

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Background

As Japanese universities are facing a continued decline in the enrollment rates of domestic students and increasing competition for international students from English-speaking universities abroad, Japanese higher education institutions are struggling in an uphill battle to maintain enrollment numbers. (Aoki, K., 2005) A total of 778 (597 private four-year institutions) are competing over dwindling numbers of prospective students. (data from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, from hereon referred to as MEXT). According to MEXT and World Education Services, a non-profit research organization, the number of foreign students worldwide has doubled to 4.12 million in 2010 compared to 2.07 million in 2000. (Choudaha and Chang, 2012). A study conducted by the Japan Student Services Organization in 2013 has shown that the largest proportion of international students in Japan is currently originating from neighboring Asian countries, particularly China and Korea, closely followed by Europe and North America. (JASSO, 2012) While current efforts by the Abe administration appointed leaders of MEXT are heavily increasing spending on the recruitment of international students, mostly the Tier 1 and 2 universities seem to be taking advantage of these financial aid packages. (Hakubun Shimomura, interview in The Japan Times) Also, due to recent political tensions between Japan and its neighbors, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a downward trend in the enrollment of Asian students from Korea and China in particular.

This study has begun as more and more of my students at the summer preparatory school where I teach in Romania have begun asking me about studying in Japan. Romania is well-known as a sending country in recent years (Roman et. al, 2008) and more Romanian families are moving into the upper income brackets. Consequently, they are now beginning to be able to afford paying tuition at private domestic universities (Mihaila, J., 2014), where the costs are on a par with

their Japanese counterparts.

As an example, I will use the statistics for my employer, Himeji Dokkyo University (HDU). According to HDU's tuition schedule for the academic year 2015-16, the total cost of attendance is estimated to be roughly JPY 1,488,300 (Himeji Dokkyo University's website). Although this figure does not include housing costs, Himeji city is a relatively inexpensive area compared to other major cities in the Kansai region, and it is possible to find accommodation at reasonable costs. According to data obtained from the Romanian Ministry of Education, the average tuition costs for attending private undergraduate schools domestically is estimated to be 9,640 euros per year, which at the current exchange rate translates to JPY1,396,113, which is just JPY 92,187 less than at HDU.

Another factor to consider are the MEXT scholarships for which Romanian students would be eligible to apply. The Japanese Ministry of Education offers monthly stipends of JPY 120,000 for international undergraduates. For a period of study of 9 months in Japan the MEXT grant would amount to JPY1,080,000 per academic year. According to an interview given to the Japan Times by the leader of MEXT, Mr. Hakubun Shimomura, his ministry has been significantly increasing the number of MEXT scholarships available in an effort which has been dubbed the Global 30 Project. The goal of Global 30 is to increase the number of international students studying in Japan to 300,000, an almost 10 fold increase from the current figures. (Hakubun Shimomura, interview in The Japan Times)

Besides scholarships from the Japanese Ministry of Education there are other sources of funding available to European students wishing to study overseas, such as the ERASMUS program, the Rotary Foundation scholarships, and many other private grants. When adding up these different sources of financial aid, studying in Japan as a full-time undergraduate on a scholarship seems to be as affordable as studying in the home country for Romanian students.

American universities achieve higher student enrollment (of both domestic and international students) through college fairs, increased internet advertising, especially for mobile-friendly applications. (Bado and Nyangau, 2012; Kovačič, 2013)

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However for universities struggling to increase enrollment, retention is also a key factor. (Yeam, T.S., 2012). The literature cites many cases in which international and often domestic freshman students as well feel marginalized and discriminated against while trying to adapt to their new environment. (Morita, 2012; Ward et. all, 2014; Lee and Padilla, 2014; Shipper, A., 2014) Obviously universities wishing to recruit foreign students will have to make certain adjustments to their curriculums and teaching methods to succeed in retaining them. It has been shown that in order to increase retention of certain groups of student minorities, strong peer support groups and mentors have to be present and actively nurtured by academic institutions. (Ward et. all, 2014) According to recent studies conducted at Nagoya University, one of the thirteen schools receiving MEXT grants under the Global 30 program, the social and academic interactions between international and domestic students are very limited. (Morita, 2012) Morita argues that this is due mainly to the fact that international students attend mostly courses offered in English, courses which are perceived as being too difficult by Japanese students because of the language barrier. Other findings from this study however also indicate that there is little social interaction outside the classes as well. Therefore Japanese universities wishing to attract and retain international students should carefully manage the integration of these students into the university academic and social life.

The number of undergraduate student-faculty research partnerships are another factor strongly correlated to higher retention rates. (Gregerman et. all, 1998). One careful read through the FAQ or advice sections of most forums for Romanians wishing to study abroad will reveal that a lot of the postings are asking about which schools would give them the opportunity to conduct research with faculty members, even for undergraduates. The advice given to these inquiries on most sites seemed to imply that students should aim at applying to universities which showcased the research of faculty members, or at least universities where they were able to contact the faculty members directly.

Methods

A group of 25 Romanian first and second year undergraduate students majoring in Applied Modern Languages or Asian Studies who were attending a summer

study workshop were surveyed about their interest in studying in Japan using a one page questionnaire. The questions were written in English, to gauge the students' ability to function in this language as well. Students in the Foreign Languages Department at HDU are offered a course of study consisting of two foreign languages, English being mandatory. This was the questionnaire used:

1. Are you studying Japanese now?
2. Are you planning to study in Japan? If you answered "Yes," for how many years?
3. When you were a senior in high school, did you have access to any information about undergraduate programs in Japan? If you answered "Yes" please explain in detail.
4. Do you know about MEXT (Monbukagakusho or Japanese Ministry of Education) scholarships? If you answered "Yes" are you considering applying?
5. If you had a chance to enroll full-time/transfer to an undergraduate institution in Japan, would you do it? If you answered "No" please state your reason.
6. If you had a chance to study a second language in addition to Japanese, what would it be?
 English German Chinese Korean Italian Spanish
7. What are your plans after graduation?

Results

The survey response rate was 100%. 19 of the students surveyed were studying Japanese, 4 were Chinese language majors and 2 were studying Korean. 96% of all students were planning studying in Japan, and of these 45% wanted to study for a period of 1 year or less, 50% were planning on staying for 2 years or more, and 5% were undecided.

Only 2% of all students had some knowledge about undergraduate institutions in Japan at the time when they were in high school and applying for acceptance to colleges.

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43% of the survey respondents were very familiar with MEXT scholarships and wanted to apply.

53% of all students stated that they wouldn't enroll full-time or transfer to a Japanese university, unanimously adding "Cost" as the reason for their decision.

Most of the students expressed interest in studying English as their second choice of foreign language (59%), the next most popular choice was Chinese (20%), followed by Korean (21%). After graduation 95% of participants indicated that they wanted to pursue a graduate degree and 5% were undecided.

Discussion

Although this study is based on a small group of respondents and further study is needed, it is safe to say that this was a highly motivated group of students who were attending summer workshops to aid their studies, and the vast majority of them (96%) were seriously planning to study in Japan. For many Romanian students the cost of studying full-time at a Japanese undergraduate institution is perceived as prohibitively high: 53% of the respondents stated the cost of tuition as their number one reason for choosing to continue their studies at a domestic institution. Less than half of the survey participants knew about MEXT scholarships, much less about the amount of the awards, or the actual costs of attending a private Japanese university.

During conversations held with the study participants, it seemed that most of them were familiar with Tokyo and Kobe Universities, as most of their fellow students who had obtained MEXT scholarships in the past had studied there. While the overall undergraduate tuition costs are estimated to be lower at these institutions (JPY834,800 at Kobe University and JPY 282,000 at Tokyo University), private universities in Japan could aim their recruitment efforts at upper-middle class families, who can afford the higher tuition costs of private universities in Romania. Besides, the admission standards at these universities are quite high and very few international students make the cut: for example, according to Kobe University's Office of Admission data for previous years the quotas for international students are very small (only 3 to 4 places per department) and often fewer

applicants than the quota allows are actually accepted into the programs. The easier threshold for acceptance at small private universities could make these universities more attractive to foreign students than their elite counterparts.

There are many possible obstacles to consider if such a recruitment effort is undertaken. One such obstacle is the different academic calendars of Western and Japanese universities. Romanian universities start their academic year in September and end in June. One possible solution is to allow international students to enroll later, or as some Japanese universities have already done, change the academic year to match the Western one. Another potential problem could be the high level of Japanese language proficiency required for entry at some Japanese universities. For example, at HDU a Level 1 or 2 on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JPLT) is required for admission. Most Romanian universities use their own testing systems and not all students are required to take the JPLT. Perhaps if Romanian or other international students were to score lower on the JPLT, special beginner Japanese classes could be created to accommodate these students. On the other hand, these students would be able to enroll in higher level English or German classes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for a lot of the Romanian undergraduate students their proficiency in other foreign languages, especially English and German is very high. The participants in this study were able to converse well in English and had no trouble answering the survey questionnaire. The MEXT scholarship does not even require a working level of Japanese: for undergraduate students, this scholarship can be obtained if an applicant is proficient in English.

Small private universities should create websites for their professors and could take advantage of the presence of native speaker lecturers to aid the international students with their transition to the new environment of the Japanese university.

As most of the study participants indicated, the continued pursuit of graduate education is a high priority. The majority of the forums and discussion boards on the internet for students interested in studying in Japan were for people looking to invest in Master's degrees or PhD's. For such students more challenging academic courses than the ones which were traditionally offered in the past would have to

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be created to cater to their needs. Support will also have to be provided by universities to help these students with the application process for Japanese graduate schools and for continuing sources of financial aid.

Obviously the recruitment effort for Romanian or other EU students should only be undertaken if a large enough number of students are likely to enroll. Perhaps a dialogue can be started with fellow faculty members at such universities for creating bridge programs, or a lobbying effort aimed directly at high school upper classmen can be initiated with the aid of Japanese embassies in the EU, or simply through the use of social media in formats and platforms friendly to such users. In the face of steadily decreasing enrollment numbers of Japanese students at small private universities a carefully planned recruitment effort in new markets like the EU member block makes sense.

Targeting foreign students not only makes financial sense, but it could also increase the host university's academic prestige if most of these students go on to further their graduate studies in Japan. Having a larger foreign student population could also be a selling point for the university when it comes to attracting prospective Japanese students, especially for those wishing to major in Foreign Studies, as Japanese students learning other languages would greatly benefit from the cultural exchange. However, as other researchers have pointed out, to achieve such a level of interaction between Japanese and international students requires an actively managed effort on the part of the host school. (Morita, 2012) While Romania is not the biggest or the most successful economy in the EU, a concentrated recruitment effort aimed at a number of EU members, like Hungary, the Czech Republic, or even the larger more well-known countries like Germany or France could help small private Japanese universities make up for the enrollment deficit of domestic students.

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Abstract

This is a small scale case study which looks at how Japanese academic institutions can increase enrollment and compete for Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology scholarships offered to foreign students recruited from previously untapped markets for human capital in the newer members of the EU block. A group of first and second year undergraduate Romanian students (n=25) majoring in Applied Modern Languages or Asian Studies were surveyed on their interest and perceptions about studying in Japan.