

Current Issues Faced by the Kyushu University International Student House

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Abstract

In the 1980s, the Japanese government pursued a policy of internationalization to make an educational (and ultimately financial) contribution to the rest of the world. The decision reflected the government's willingness to take advantage of an opportunity to join the international economic community following a period of rapid growth. As Japan moved toward internationalization, it struggled with issues associated with integrating ethnically diverse populations into the mainstream. As a result of these failed efforts, today there is a lack of programs specifically designed to promote the benefits of diversity in educational institutions. Unclear and hastily established policies established by the central Japanese government have resulted in many problems. Issues associated with promoting diversity are the focus of this report.

I. Introduction

In the 1980s, the Japanese government pursued a policy of internationalization to make an educational (and ultimately financial) contribution to the rest of the world. The decision reflected the government's willingness to take advantage of an opportunity to join the international economic community following a period of rapid growth. As a result, in the past two decades Japan has increased its number of cultural and linguistic training exchanges with foreign countries. Perhaps the most famous example is the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, through which individual Japanese prefectures invite young foreign college graduates to teach English to Japanese secondary students, manage cultural exchange programs, and perform limited tasks for local government offices and schools. A second exchange program was also initiated during the Nakasone administration: the International Student Program (ISP, or *Ryugakusei Ukeire*). The program's stated goal was to bring 100,000 foreign students to Japan over a ten year period (1985-1994). However, unclear and hastily established policies established by the central Japanese government resulted in many problems.

The focus of this report is on issues associated with promoting diversity. During Japan's move toward internationalization in the 1980s, the country struggled with integrating ethnically diverse populations into the mainstream. As a result of these failed efforts, today there is a lack of programs specifically designed to promote the benefits of diversity in educational institutions; Japan therefore lags behind the United States and European countries in terms of accepting and encouraging national diversity. An important example of a program hastily established without the necessary attention to detail is the creation of International Student Houses (ISHs, or *Kokusai Koryu Kaikan*; in this report I will refer to them as *Kaikan*) at 226 educational institutions, including 56

national universities. The purpose of this paper is to examine the roles and challenges of the ISH at Kyushu National University.

II. Background

1. International Student Population in Japan

The Japan Ministry of Education reports that the current number of international students studying in Japan is 117,927. A breakdown of international students by region of origin is presented in Table 1, and a breakdown by specific country is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Region of Origin of International Students in Japan, 2005.

Africa	935	0.8%
Asia	109,291	92.7%
Europe	3,307	2.8%
Middle East	667	0.6%
North America	2,076	1.8%
South Pacific	563	0.5%
South America	1,088	0.8%
Total	17,927	1100%

Source: Japan Ministry of Education, 2007

Table 2. Breakdown of International Students in Japan by Home Country, 2005.

China	74,292
Korea	15,974
Taiwan	4,121
Malaysia	2,156
Vietnam	2,119
Thailand	1,734
United States	1,790
Indonesia	1,553
Bangladesh	1,456
Sri Lanka	1,499
Total	117,927

Source: Japan Ministry of Education and Science, 2007.

2. *Kaikan* Policies

A surprising number of Japanese are unaware of the academic, economic, and cultural benefits of international houses, and therefore question the need for so many. The basic function of an ISH is to provide dormitory space for international students. Approximately 70 percent of all international students in Japan live in *Kaikan* and the rest live in apartments, public or private university student housing, regular school dormitories, or ISHs that are not part of the national program. One of the main purposes of ISHs is to provide space for Japanese university students and community residents to meet and interact with people from other parts of the world. This was the goal of the first “International Student House,” which was established in New York City in 1924. However, as they are today, Japanese ISHs serve as residences for international students only, resulting in

segregation between local and foreign students.

3. Kyushu University's *Kokusai Koryu Kaikan*

Kyushu National University accepts international students twice a year (April and October).

Approximately 250 students from different programs live in the university's *Kaikan* during each semester. Data on international students attending the university by program for the spring and fall semesters of 2006 are presented as Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of International Students Residing in the Kyushu University International Student House by Program, Spring and Fall Semesters, 2006.

Undergraduates	7
Graduates	75
Pre-graduates	72
Japanese Language Course	22
Japan-Korea G-pre Education	5
JTW Short Term Program	46
Japan/cultural Program	23
Total	250

In my position as Special Advisor to the Kyushu University *Kokusai Koryu Kaikan* I have identified three primary challenges:

1. Organization. It is unclear who is responsible for managing the facility and organizing functions for residents. The *Kaikan* staff currently consists of six individuals—one supervisor and five part-time employees. This is an insufficient number for the workload required of them. The university needs to take a more active stance in managing the *Kaikan* to ensure that student residents receive sufficient assistance. From my conversations with ISH residents it is clear that almost all foreign students view the *Kaikan* as a dormitory. This is unfortunate because the formal name of the facility—*Kokusai Koryu Kaikan*—implies a space set aside for cultural and language exchanges. Thus, in many communities local Japanese perceive *Kaikan* as places to meet and to speak English with foreigners.

Students are allowed to live in the *Kaikan* for a maximum of one year, after which they must find their own places to live—a stressful situation for many students who still lack Japanese communication and social skills. In addition, renting an apartment in Japan requires a large amount of cash. Landlords require *Shiki kin* (damage and cleaning deposits), *Rei kin* (first and last month's rent), and *hoshounin* (a second person who accepts responsibility for the tenant's actions). For many international students, these are significant barriers to living off-campus.

2. Atmosphere for study. In some important ways the Kyushu University *Kaikan* is not an appropriate place for students to concentrate on their studies, especially those international students who are not financially, linguistically, or socially independent. Two types of students live in the ISH: those who have scholarships from the Japanese government, Japanese private organizations and those who must find jobs in nearby communities.

Although the official work limitation is 28 hours per week, many students in the second category end up working so much that they have little time to study. Some students find themselves unable to graduate because their main focus has been on earning and saving money. Furthermore, a small number of students return to the *Kaikan* after working late-night hours, raising the question of who should take responsibility for their security.

Another environmental issue concerns the combination of international undergraduate and graduate students living in the same building. On one floor it is common to find older, more experienced students mixed with young Asian males who don't know how to cook or to share space in a public kitchen. In one case a graduate student who is a lawyer in his home country reported having difficulty dealing with the behaviors of younger, less mature students. Part of the *Kaikan* manager's job is dealing with interpersonal issues, which can be very difficult.

3. Kyushu University is just beginning to offer multicultural education. Many Japanese do not understand the difference between *multiculturalism* (understanding the culture, history, and language of people living in a host country) and *internationalism* (learning about other countries' education, community, and socio-political systems). The current rise in interest in multiculturalism can be traced to three factors: a) business and professional people relocating due to international activity, b) indigenous populations asserting their traditional identities, and c) refugees and immigrants escaping their home countries in hope of better lives in general or educations in particular. Lack of knowledge of issues associated with multiculturalism among many Japanese government (Monbu-sho), educators and school or university employees is resulting in conflicts between the current Japanese policy for international students and the actual situations found at many schools.

Japanese communities and educational institutions are not yet accustomed to culturally diverse environments. Unfortunately, many foreign students misinterpret this lack of understanding as rejection or ambivalence. Another problem is that there is no diversity curriculum in place in most educational institutions and communities. This explains why in many Japanese cities and prefectures local residents still treat international students as guests, instead of as individuals who want to participate in local events. This adds to the self-image that many international students have of themselves as outsiders. On the other hand, a considerable percentage of *Kaikan* residents are not interested in multiculturalism or diversity. These students often fail to speak Japanese even though they have lived in Japan for several years; some simply don't make any effort to learn about Japanese culture and society. Thus, Japanese (who are very concerned about cleanliness in their living spaces) are very surprised to see ISHs that are dirty and filled with old books, computers, futons, and other pieces of furniture that international students simply abandon when they move out.

III. Data Collection and Findings

To collect information on attitudes toward *Kaikan* life, survey forms were distributed to 250 students; 103 usable surveys were returned (41% completion rate). Barriers to completing surveys included language (i.e.,

for students who spoke or read neither Japanese nor English) and lack of interest in living in a *Kaikan*. Additional data were gathered via interviews and personal observations over a six-month period (April to December, 2006). The author visited the *Kaikan* once or twice per week during the study period to have meetings with staff and to make personal observations of student life. Interviewees included representatives from international student support agencies and sponsors.

The findings can be organized into four areas of concern:

1. Some students wonder whether the *Kaikan* should be viewed as a dormitory or an independent living environment. If it is a dormitory, then there are expectations that the support staff should be active in organizing and running student activities. In particular, students from China, Korea, and other Asian countries have strong expectations about receiving support while living in an international environment. On the other hand, in many cases *Kaikan* residents arrive with no prior understanding that they are expected to study Japanese language and culture.

2. International students are often unaware that they are expected to communicate and interact with Japanese students. When they do interact, there is a problem with missed opportunities for language practice. The large majority of international students use English to converse with their Japanese friends and with each other. Thus, many international students make improvements in their English but not in their Japanese. According to a survey, 68% of *Kaikan* student residents access the Japanese version of the *Kaikan* web site and 3.6% the English version. However, 80% of the surveyed students stated that they communicate with other international students in English, with Japanese primarily used by Chinese and Korean students. Japanese educational institutions need to make it very clear what is expected of international students in terms of linguistic goals, study objectives, and social expectations.

Table 4. Stated Reasons for Studying at a Japanese University among the Interviewed Kyushu University International Student House Residents.

To get a degree	42%
To learn skills	34%
To get a job	2.6%
Interested in culture	14%
Other	7.4%

3. Students are limited to one year's residency in the *Kaikan*, which creates stress among students who lack financial resources and/or knowledge of Japanese social rules.

4. Many students feel that they have too few opportunities for making Japanese friends, since their classes are generally held separate from the main student population. This is especially true for graduate students, who told me that there are very few Japanese students in their classes.

Table 5. Sources of Kyushu International Student House Resident Financial Support.

Ministry of Education scholarships	40%
Home country scholarships	8%
Other Japanese scholarships	11%
Part-time employment	31%
Other	10%

5. Approximately one-half of the surveyed students receive scholarships from either the governments of their home countries or the Japanese government, while 41% support themselves with part-time jobs or get financial support from their families and Japanese private organizations. There is a perception among some administrators that many international students come to Japan to work instead of study, and therefore fail to keep up with their school assignments or to complete requirements for graduation.

IV. Suggestions Based on the Interview Data

1. General university and specific *Kaikan* management policies need to be clarified and communicated to incoming students. Understanding Japanese culture is challenging, especially for first-time visitors and new international students. Every effort must be made to clearly express rules and management responsibilities and to address the most common issues faced by orientations, newcomers in the student guidebook and on the *Kaikan* web site.

2. It is important to remember that new students usually have very little (if any) Japanese language knowledge, and are therefore particularly dependent on *Kaikan* staff for support.

3. Until recently, Japanese have had few opportunities to meet and converse with foreigners. As a result, many still treat foreign students as guests who require special social, psychological, or (in the case of students from other Asian countries) financial support. As a result, many Kyushu University *Kaikan* residents expect special treatment from Japanese because of their foreign status.

4. Managing a *Kaikan* is an enormous task—much too large for a single faculty member. The University needs to hire special staff whose primary responsibility is to manage the facility and its employees.

5. A strong effort needs to be made to provide multicultural education to undergraduates—both Japanese and international. Multicultural classes can help Japanese students who are planning to go to foreign countries to study and help international students to deal with culture shock when they arrive in Japan. If the Japanese government continues to encourage educational institutions to invite overseas students, this suggestion is very important for the successful implementation of that policy.

IV. Conclusion and Implications

Many problems associated with accepting international students can be traced to a lack of discussion and planning on the part of the educational institutions and ministries that created the plan. Most importantly, those institutions need to address the issue of how foreign students are treated upon their arrival. They must

determine whether the students they accept are financially and socially independent. Unlike in other countries, many international students in Japan are allowed to work without applying for a work visa. In some cases, students come to Japan for the sole purpose of working and sending money back to their families. In addition, some students who receive scholarships from the Japanese government (or other Japanese organizations) do not understand the obligations that are tied to such scholarships, and therefore make little effort to perform at a high level academically. Thus, the Japanese government needs to establish clear policies for international students regarding work, visas, scholarships and its obligation, living accommodations, and study requirements—language and otherwise.

Another implication of the findings is that Japanese universities, colleges, and high schools need to improve their curriculums for understanding issues regarding multicultural society. One result of this improvement may be that Japanese people will get a better understanding of their own collective identity. Other potential results include: Japanese communities may come to accept international students as part of the landscape and not as special guests, Japanese students may improve their English speaking skills, and intercultural communication may be enhanced.

Finally, the findings suggest that ISHs are inappropriate places for serious international students to concentrate on their studies. A significant percentage of international students are not financially, linguistically, or socially capable of living independently, raising the question of why they are invited to Japan without checking to make sure they have the necessary support to succeed. The Japanese government needs to establish a clear policy for these students, otherwise we will continue to lose them to programs sponsored by other countries. As part of this effort, Japanese cultural institutions need to establish warm and welcoming multicultural environments and to prepare multicultural curriculums for both international and Japanese students.

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