

Some Observations on Interaction and Socialisation amongst Exchange Students Themselves and their Hosts.

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Introduction

In the last decade tertiary institutions in the world have increasingly focussed on attracting international students; in particular, Australian universities have aggressively marketed themselves in the global education sector and as a group have now positioned themselves as the world's fifth-largest provider of higher education.

In Europe, government ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process gathered in Belgium in April 2009 and agreed in their final communiqué that 20% of students graduating in European tertiary institutions should have had a study or training period abroad by 2020. It is indeed a remarkable target. (For details see the website below.)

(<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/Bologna/>)

In Japan, the policy announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) is that the number of international students studying at Japanese institutions should reach 300,000 by 2020. At present (2010) there are some 120,000 overseas students in Japan. It is clear that the Ministry's objective will present a considerable challenge to many universities since they would be obliged to double (or, in some cases, treble) their current international student intake in order to meet the national target. Unlike the European Bologna Process, the Japanese policy has nothing to say about the desirability of ensuring that Japanese students should be exposed to any degree of study abroad.

Yokota (2006) indicates in his report on Japan's future strategy for international education that nearly 20% of the universities that he had surveyed expressed some reservation about the desirability of increasing the presence of international students in their campuses due to lack of (or insufficient) interactions between Japanese and international students. This contention prompted the writer to look into the situation of her own university; she has commenced a study to investigate how international students socialise and form interpersonal relationships amongst themselves and with Japanese people whilst studying as exchange

students at Oita University.

Oita University offers a programme called the “International Programme at Oita University” (thereafter, IPOU for short) for exchange students from partner universities. IPOU offers Japanese language courses from beginners-level to advanced learners. In addition, it offers courses on various aspects of Japan (history, economy, culture) in English so that those who wish to come to Oita without Japanese language skills are able to join the programme, provided that the English language skills of non-native speakers are sufficient to take courses in English. IPOU usually attracts students mainly from America and Europe. American students are Japanese language/Studies majors or minors who plan to stay at Oita for two semesters; on the other hand, European students who intend to stay at Oita for one semester possess, on the whole, little or no knowledge of Japanese language/Studies. There is one exception to this generalisation in that students from Hungary have majored in Japanese at their university and stay in Japan for two semesters.

The intention of this paper is to consider the results of three Inquiries, two of which were conducted in the academic year 2008-2009 and one in 2009-2010. The Inquiries were designed to evaluate the extent to which international students at Oita University interact amongst themselves and with Japanese people. We examine, first, in the next section, the results of Inquiries conducted in 2008-2009.

1. Results of the Inquiry conducted in 2008-2009.

As a way of ascertaining the degree of interaction between international students and local students of the University and the general community, two Inquiries were conducted.

The research method adopted for conducting the Inquiries was by a Questionnaire and follow-up interviews in English. The first Inquiry (cohort 1) was conducted in July 2008 and the second (cohort 2), utilising an identical Questionnaire, in February 2009. Both Inquiries involved exchange students at the Centre for International Education and Research (thereafter CIER). For the first Inquiry the Questionnaire was completed by a sample of 9 students from the USA and 2 students from Europe. The second Inquiry was conducted with 7 European students. Subsequent follow-up interviews with both sets of students were conducted for clarification and elaboration of some of the crucial statements of the

Questionnaire.

The Questionnaire (a full copy of which is available from the author) was divided into two sections: the initial part, Part A, completed by each student, consisted of six questions designed to elicit information on the student's background and experience; Part B consisted of twenty "statements" relating to their attitudes towards various intercultural aspects of life in Japan and Oita — "statements" with which the student indicated a certain degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale.

A number of similarities in the responses of students to "statements" of the two Inquiries emerged. The most important similarity lay in the fact that the use of the English language for communication among students, and between students and staff, was widespread. However, there was one notable exception to this tendency — Korean students were more able than others to use Japanese and they were less able to communicate in English than other nationalities.

In the social area, it is interesting to note that there was little difference between how students in the two Inquiries made friends with Japanese and other international students. Although a wide range of friendship-making methods were listed by students in the Questionnaires, it is clear that friendships were essentially made *on campus* and that there was negligible interaction between international students and the broader Japanese community outside the University.

A major section of the Questionnaire completed by the two cohorts of students referred to attitudes regarding reasons for studying in Japan and whether it was thought that satisfying results had emerged. Respondents were asked to rate each "statement" on a scale 1-5, with 1 being the most positive and 5 the most negative. On analysing the results of the set of 20 "statements" the following results were obtained:

Cohort 1: 74.5% of the responses were in the "strongly agree" or "agree" category (i.e., positive). 6.4% were in the "strongly disagree" or "disagree" (i.e., negative) category. 19.1% were ambivalent responses.

Cohort 2: 72.9% of the responses were in the "strongly agree" or "agree" category. 13.6% were in the "strongly disagree" or "disagree" category. 13.6% were ambivalent responses.

We can legitimately conclude, therefore, that *both* cohorts of students found their experience at Oita University to be productive and satisfying.

As a follow-up to the Questionnaire an interview was conducted with each of the students in the two Inquiries. The questions posed in the follow-up interviews were as follows:

1. What do you think the role of the tutor should be? Have you ever felt a barrier between you and your tutor?
2. Have you ever made a Japanese friend(s) or acquaintance(s) outside the University?
3. In what way have you interacted with international students?
4. In what way have you interacted with Japanese within the University? In what way have you interacted with Japanese outside the University?
5. Has the International Programme at Oita University (IPOU) met your expectations? What did you expect from the University prior to coming here?

There were thus 11 interviews conducted with cohort 1 students and 7 interviews conducted with cohort 2 students.

The interviews (each of which lasted some 40 minutes) were designed to elicit a general, overall view of (a) the satisfactory nature of the “Oita Experience” and whether it had come up to expectations, (b) the extent to which friendships and contacts had been made within and without the student body and (c) the role of the tutor who had been designated to assist them as a “buddy” in coping with aspects of academic and personal life in Oita.

With regard to (a), it appears that there was no generalised, widespread expectation of what might be expected at Oita University. Yet interviewees believed that whatever expectations they might have had were exceeded by the actual rewarding experience of life and study in Oita.

With regard to (b), the question of friendships and contacts was more moot. Americans and Europeans considered that they were able to make contact more easily with Chinese students than with Korean. This was partly because the Chinese spoke better English than the Korean and also because the Koreans, speaking Japanese considerably more fluently than English, tended to mix more with Japanese students. Language was actually a sub-set of similar cultural values shared by Korean and Japanese people. Korean student interviewees, when asked about friend-making, indicated that they did not intentionally exclude Americans

and Europeans from their parties etc., but admitted that they did not know how to approach students of these nationalities. In the event, there was evidence that Korean students effectively isolated themselves from other students and the question arose: what *technical/administrative* factors gave rise to or exacerbated this isolation? The answer might lie in the degree to which Korean students predominated in the population-mix of International House — the main University-provided student accommodation. Statistics show that in Spring 2008 (which conforms to the cohort 1 students in the two Inquiries), the 17 students from Korea constituted the high proportion of 44% of the total number of student occupants; it is, therefore, little wonder that they tended to “stick together”. By Autumn 2008, the period of cohort 2, the proportion of Korean students in International House had diminished to 34%. They still, however, constituted the largest single nationality group.

There were other variations over the period in the distribution of students by nationality in International House worthy of note. It was not only the Korean representation which fell — a big decline absolutely and proportionately was registered by Mainland Chinese students. The 10 students of Spring 2008, 26% of the total, had fallen to 5 students, 12 % of the total, in Autumn 2008. Other falls were registered by Hong Kong and Taiwanese students (from a total of 3 in Spring to zero in Autumn). As a counter to these various falls there was a strong and dramatic increase, absolutely and proportionately, in the numbers from USA and Europe between Spring and Autumn 2008. In Spring there were 7 students from USA (18%), a figure which had increased to 11 (27%) in Autumn. Those from Europe were only 2 (5%) in Spring, but 11 (27%) in Autumn. We can see, therefore, that the combined number of students from USA and Europe (9 in Spring, or 23%) strongly outweighed those from Korea in Autumn (22 from USA/Europe, 54% versus 14 from Korea, 34%). The absolute and relative diminution in the Spring 2008 domination by Korean students by the time of the arrival of the next cohort of students in Autumn 2008 is probably a major factor in the enhancement of inter-student interaction in the House; it appears, for instance, from the interviews and additional information, that some Korean students in the latter period had been endeavouring to make social contact with German students (5 in Autumn) with the assistance of dictionaries.

The absolute figures from which percentages in the previous paragraph have been derived are given in Tables 1 and 2 on the following page.

Table 1. Number of International Students in International House by Countries and Areas of Origin (Spring 2008)

Countries/ Areas	Mainland China	Hong Kong	Taiwan	Korea	USA	Europe	Total
Number	10	2	1	17	7	2	39

Table 2. Number of International Students in International House by Countries and Areas of Origin (Autumn 2008)

Countries/ Areas	Mainland China	Hong Kong	Taiwan	Korea	USA	Europe	Total
Number	5	0	0	14	11	11	41

The issue of friendships and contacts between American and European students on the one hand and the broader Japanese community outside the University on the other was also considered in the Inquiries. In general, it was found that this group of students did not develop any form of major social interaction with the Japanese community. One reason for this lack of networking was that the students were occupied with their academic work-programmes during the week. Another reason, so far as the Europeans were concerned, was that the Europeans spend only one semester in Oita and, in consequence, lack the opportunity to expand their interests beyond the campus. And, apart from a shortage of time, their Japanese language skills are generally inferior initially to those of students from USA, with but little time to develop them further. American students, to the contrary, spend two semesters (a year) in Oita and although their Japanese language skills are superior to those of Europeans, seem reticent to engage in “deep” cross-cultural engagement. For both Americans and Europeans, when they *did* have contact with the Japanese community off campus, they did so in eating and drinking venues or in their places of part-time employment. There was one situation, however, where American and European students did manage to expand their campus horizons — a relatively few of the male students were lucky or adventurous enough to find Japanese girlfriends. It was then that their networks off-campus expanded; they were introduced to their friend’s family and friends and found themselves welcomed as members of the Japanese “in-group”. Thus they were “accepted” into the Japanese community. In summary, we might conclude that it is essential for Japanese students to *assist* international students to integrate with the wider Japanese community.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that foreigner initiative is also necessary! For instance,

out of the seven international students in the second cohort of autumn 2008, *six* of them had not made any friends or acquaintances outside the University. Only one of the seven, exhibiting a higher degree of language ability than the others *and* displaying a more “out-going” attitude, *had* mixed freely with Japanese; he had joined a public sports club.

Nor must we forget that to the extent the campus itself provides various facilities for social intercourse there is thereby a diminished incentive for international students to seek companionship in the outside community. *Why* go elsewhere when sports facilities, meeting-places, sport or culture clubs, shops etc are provided on campus? Even in International House (located in the city centre of Oita) students tend to cook together and have parties at weekends.

With regard to (c), the role of the tutor, it was generally agreed by interviewees that their role was not only useful but *essential*. Some specific problems, however, were alluded to; these can be briefly mentioned as follows:

- Tutors did not always understand their role (i.e., further training or instruction is required)
- Tutors sometimes did not have adequate knowledge of the designated student’s language and cultural background to be able to converse or assist adequately with problems.
- Tutors sometimes failed to convey essential aspects of Japanese culture to “their” students.
- Some tutors did the *minimum* of work expected of them (eg. allocated only one hour per week for “buddy” assistance)
- American and European students had expectations — not always met — that their tutors would help them make social contacts with Japanese in the community.

It thus appeared from the interviews that there are a number of specific factors regarding the efficiency of the “buddy” relationships which need to be addressed.

2. Results of the Inquiry conducted in 2009-2010.

The third Inquiry was conducted in July 2009 in the same manner as the previous two Inquiries discussed in the first section. The third cohort of 23 students, having arrived at Oita in September 2008 and April 2009, consisted of 11 from America, 9 from Europe and 3 from Australia. Their degree of Japanese language competency on arrival varied; there were 3 beginners, 18 intermediate learners and 2 advanced learners.

It should be noted that the third cohort of students is very different from the two groups previously investigated in terms of student background. Thus, amongst students from America there were 5 Asian background-students (3 Vietnamese, 1 Japanese and 1 Filipino American) and in the Australian group there were 2 Asian background-students (1 Chinese Malaysian and 1 Indonesian). Apart from the 7 Asian background-students in the combined American/Australian group, in the European group there were five Hungarians. Unlike most other Europeans at Oita the Hungarian students were intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese. They naturally tended to mix with Asian students more willingly.

The following Table 3 show the composition of nationalities in International House. Unlike at certain times during 2008, Korean students were no longer the largest single country group in Spring 2009.

Table 3: Number of International Students in International House by Countries and Areas of Origin (Spring 2009)

Countries	China	Korea	USA	Europe	Australia	Total
Number	6	5	11	9	3	34
Percent	17.6	14.7	32.4	26.5	8.8	100.0

The important question is whether or not this changed demography of students in the latest investigation makes an impact on patterns of their socialisation. It is clear that the tendency for any one national group to dominate the International House occupancy pattern is diminishing as a direct result of the growth of the “pool” of intentional university exchange relationships. We are finding that a large number of small national groups are coming into existence and that various combinations of these groups form and reform in accordance with particular objectives eg, parties, trips, sports, etc. This development can have only positive results for enhanced student interaction. If this is indeed a correct inference, then we can with confidence draw the conclusion that *diversity* of international students' background and balanced intake of the students are the *sine qua non* of effective student interaction. And *how* is this diversity to be achieved? Primarily through the expansion of the number of institutions and their world geographic spread from which students are drawn.

But it should be noted that the development of a large number of smaller national group arising from a greater geographic “spread” of the partner universities does not seem to have had any effect on the general interaction between the student population on the one hand and the wider Japanese community on the other. This is an aspect of life in Oita, which

demands further investigation.

With regard to the results of the Questionnaire, as with the first two student cohorts, on the whole, all students in cohort 3 responded positively to all “statements”. The results from this group are not markedly different from the previous cohorts. They also made friends though their tutors, tutors of other international students, parties at International House, classes, and clubs. Two respondents mentioned that they also made a friend of the owner of a city restaurant to which they went regularly. One of the two was a Japanese beginner from Europe; however, lack of Japanese language skills and his limited time at Oita did not deter him from making a Japanese friend. As the other was an advanced speaker of Japanese from America, there is no doubt that he must have helped the European student in various ways in his communicating with the Japanese owner. But it was the European's out-going personality and his shared enthusiasm with the owner and the American student for surfing that made him travel with them for surfing at weekends.

We now turn our attention to the follow-up interviews with the cohort 3 students.

The same questions as posed in previous Inquiries were used to solicit further information on students' social interaction on and off campus.

All interviewees except two Americans expressed their satisfaction with their tutors and life at Oita. (The two-Americans case will be discussed in detail subsequently.) With regard to the tutor (“buddy”) system, as with previous cohorts of students, similar views regarding its necessity were also expressed by all students of this Inquiry. All but the afore-mentioned American students also regarded their tutors as their friends.

The cohort 3 students were much more interested in joining student sports or culture clubs on campus as their extra-curricular activities than the previous two cohorts. The cohort 3 students stayed in the clubs longer as they said that they were “warmly” welcomed by Japanese students in the clubs. Amongst the previous cohorts of students, however, there were some students who did make an attempt to participate in the club activities. But all except one student failed to be involved at any depth.

It may be recalled that we referred to two American students who declared themselves to be unhappy with their tutors and life in Oita. Whilst they accepted the fact that the system

of tutors being assigned to each international student had considerable merit, they were of the opinion that the particular tutors who had been assigned to them failed to overcome language and culture barriers. The American students were unable to regard their tutors as their friends. (We might note that students are told at outset that they are able to request a change in tutors if for any reason incompatibilities emerge.) In addition to this problem, they admitted that they had been unable to make *any* Japanese friends either on or off campus. Both students claimed that they had made an attempt to socialise with Japanese by joining the clubs. But it would appear that their attempts were only perfunctory. One student had joined the *Aikido* club on campus, but soon left; the other joined the campus rugby club, signed up for six months, but attended only two sessions.

3. Conclusion

There is one thing we find in common in the three results conducted over the past two years. Nearly all international students in the Inquiries responded that they were pleased and satisfied about their study-abroad experience and the academic and social life that they led at Oita University. This encouraging outcome is no doubt due, to a large extent, to the effectiveness of the tutor system (although not perfect) and the attentive care demonstrated by academics in the CIER and by administrative staff members in the International Office. It was the students who decided to study abroad and who wanted to study for a semester or two at Oita; it was not to be expected, therefore, that they harboured any anti-Japanese sentiments prior to coming to Japan. It is to be hoped — and the evidence from the three Inquiries suggests our hopes are justified — that they return home with satisfaction after their completion of the study programme. It follows, therefore, that it is important for us at the CIER to make continuous efforts to improve the academic, physical and mental environment for students.

One of the more difficult problems to solve is that of how we should best design the Programme to enhance students' initial lack of Japanese language. We fully recognise the fact that a one-semester sojourn in Japan is never going to prove adequate to reach fluency in Japanese. Nevertheless we are convinced that, short as the stay might be, students coming to Japan with zero or negligible Japanese leave Oita with good basic grounding in the language. There have indeed been improvements in the curriculum over recent years designed to increase the amount of time and attention paid to work on the oral acquisition of the

language. It is anticipated that further work in this direction will continue.

Evidence gained in these Inquiries strongly suggests that further steps must be taken to stimulate a greater degree of social interaction among international students and between these students as a block and the wider Japanese community. We are considering the possibility of introducing a programme on intercultural relations for both international students and University-appointed tutors. The detail of this is still to be worked out.

It has become obvious that international students are increasingly desirous of joining various student clubs and circles which exist on campus. However, information about these is fragmentary and the CIER has not been able to assist international students with appropriate information. It is accordingly considered desirable for the CIER to familiarise itself with the clubs' activities and to make international students fully aware of the facilities available.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, we come back to the overall question of how international students should optimally integrate. It is the strong conviction of the author, following her analysis of the three Inquiries discussed in this paper, that optimal results are to be achieved only in an environment of diversity. To achieve the desired diversity it is essential that the number of institutions from which the international student body is drawn should be as large as possible. It thus follows that no one nationality or a small group of nationalities should be allowed to dominate the International Programme at Oita University. Diversity is the key to success!

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