

Exploring International Students from ASEAN Countries in International Double Degree Programs at Japanese Universities

— Motivation, experience and challenges —

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Abstract: This study investigates international double degree programs at Japanese universities, focusing on the experiences of students from developing countries. Through qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews with seven master's-level students from Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia, the study explores their motivations, expectations, learning experiences, and cultural challenges. Key motivations for choosing these programs include gaining international experience, enhancing career prospects, experiencing Japanese culture, accessing advanced research facilities, and receiving financial support. Students expect high-quality education and an internationalized campus environment. However, the research reveals a gap between expectations and reality, with many students feeling somewhat isolated from the main Japanese campus community. The study highlights differences in teaching methods between students' home countries and Japan, requiring adaptation to new learning strategies. Language barriers emerge as a significant obstacle to deeper integration and participation in campus life. Cultural adaptation, particularly to Japanese societal norms and communication styles, presents challenges but also opportunities for personal growth. Practical difficulties, such as navigating the Japanese banking system and handling administrative tasks, underscore the need for more robust support policies. Despite these challenges, students find their cultural immersion in Japan to be highly positive and transformative, fostering greater cultural awareness and adaptability. The study concludes with recommendations for Japanese universities to improve international double degree programs, including enhancing language support, promoting cultural integration, improving administrative assistance, and fostering inclusive campus environments. Future research should expand to include perspectives from Japanese students and those from developed countries, as well as investigate long-term impacts on students' careers and personal development. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the experiences of international students in Japanese double degree programs, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive support systems and inclusive practices in enhancing student experiences and promoting the internationalization of higher education.

Key words: Internationalization, Double Degree Programs, Higher Education, Japan,
Student Experience

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has become a pivotal strategy for universities

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worldwide, aiming to foster cross-cultural understanding and enhance academic collaboration. Within this context, international double degree programs have emerged as a significant initiative, offering students the opportunity to earn degrees from two distinct institutions across different countries. This study focuses on the experiences of master's students from developing countries, particularly those from Southeast Asia, who are enrolled in such programs at Japanese universities. Despite the increasing enrollment of international students in Japan, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by students from developing countries in these programs.

The impetus for this study is rooted in the need to elucidate the specific experiences of these students, who often encounter distinct cultural, linguistic, and educational challenges compared to their peers from developed nations. By examining their motivations, expectations, learning experiences, and cultural adaptation processes, this research seeks to provide insights that can inform the development of more effective support systems and integration strategies within Japanese higher education institutions.

The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows: What factors motivate students from developing countries to enroll in Japanese double degree programs? What are their expectations and experiences during their academic journey? What cultural and academic challenges do they face, and how do they navigate these challenges? Through a qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews, this study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of these students' experiences.

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the internationalization of higher education, offering practical recommendations for enhancing international double degree programs in Japan. The findings aim to inform policymakers and educators about the specific needs of students from developing countries, ultimately enhancing their academic and cultural experiences.

Literature Review

The internationalization of higher education is a critical focus for universities worldwide, aimed at enhancing global competitiveness and fostering cross-cultural academic exchanges. In Japan, this trend is driven by governmental policies and institutional strategies designed to attract international students and establish collaborative programs with foreign universities. Among these initiatives, international double degree programs have gained prominence, offering students the opportunity to earn degrees from two institutions in different countries. This literature review explores the internationalization of higher education in Japan, alongside the development and challenges of international double degree programs within Japanese universities.

Internationalization of Japanese Universities

The concept of internationalization in higher education is broad and diverse, with varying interpretations and applications among stakeholders at both institutional and national levels. Knight (2021) identifies internationalization as a process that can encompass improving quality, increasing access, serving society, achieving economic and commercial benefits, exerting geopolitical influence, raising institutional or national rankings, and developing students as global citizens or addressing global challenges through international collaborative research.

Government Initiatives and Challenges

The Japanese government has actively promoted the internationalization of higher education as a strategic policy to enhance the country's global standing and academic collaboration. Initiatives such as the Top Global University Project and the Re-Inventing Japan Project have been launched to support world-class universities and promote international collaboration (Ota, 2018). These initiatives aim to increase the number of international students in Japan and encourage Japanese students to study abroad, enriching the academic environment and promoting cultural exchange.

Despite these efforts, the internationalization of Japanese universities faces several challenges. Critics argue that many initiatives result in superficial changes rather than transformative improvements in the academic environment (Ota, 2018). The focus on increasing international student numbers often overshadows the need for integrating these students into campus life and enhancing the quality of education in a global context.

International double degree programs in Japanese Universities

International double degree programs play a pivotal role in enhancing an institution's reputation by increasing internationalization and establishing partnerships with renowned foreign universities. While Japanese universities have historically faced less pressure to engage in such programs (Yefanova, 2013), these initiatives align with the International Programs and Provider Mobility (IPPM) framework, which emphasizes the movement of higher education programs and providers to students' home countries (Knight, 2019).

These programs are a significant component of Japan's higher education internationalization strategy. They allow students to earn degrees from both a Japanese university and a partner institution abroad, offering a unique educational experience that blends diverse academic and cultural perspectives.

In 2017, 189 Japanese universities offered double degree programs, which are often more feasible than joint degree programs due to regulatory limitations. These programs can be implemented when they meet the quality standards and criteria of each collaborating institution. Despite government efforts to promote these programs by revising regulations and providing funding, challenges persist due to the reluctance of some Japanese universities. Hanada et al. note that many joint and double degree programs remain inactive, despite being established through partnership agreements.

The development of double degree programs in Japan has been supported by government initiatives and guidelines that encourage collaboration between Japanese and foreign universities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2015). These programs are designed to equip students with the skills needed for leadership roles in a global society, reflecting a commitment to fostering globally competent graduates (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2016).

Double degree programs appeal to students by offering broader study choices (Chan, 2012). Research by Russell et al. (2008) indicates that about 75% of double degree students develop more job-relevant skills and enhance their employment prospects. This suggests that double degree programs can compete with traditional first-class university degrees, thereby increasing a university's international visibility and prestige.

However, implementing double degree programs presents several challenges. Language barriers, cultural adaptation, and the integration of international students into the Japanese academic and social environment are significant issues that need to be addressed (CAMPUS Asia Monitoring, 2016). Additionally, the administrative and logistical complexities of managing joint programs with foreign

institutions can pose challenges for universities (MEXT, 2015). This revised version organizes the content logically, ensuring a smoother flow and clearer presentation of ideas. It transitions seamlessly between topics, providing a cohesive narrative on the role and challenges of international double degree programs in Japanese universities.

Beyond the structure of double degree programs, this study focuses on the student experience, particularly related to culture. Culture involves sharing assumptions, values, life directions, faith, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions (Dahl, 2003). Bamford (2020) suggests that students navigating new cultures inevitably encounter stereotypes, requiring openness from all involved. Support from universities is crucial in helping students adapt. Effective joint study programs must be developed with a focus on student cultural experiences.

Students play a significant role in driving internationalization, reciprocally influencing economies and other global factors. In international higher education, the student experience is crucial in fostering a "culture of mobility," particularly in international double-degree programs (Bamford, 2020). This links back to Knight's definition, highlighting the importance of integrating international and intercultural dimensions into educational institutions. Therefore, the individual student experience must always be considered when discussing this subject.

A student's social identity is a crucial part of their cultural experience. Christou (2018) suggests that this can significantly impact higher education, implying that institutions should cater to various sociocultural needs to ensure high satisfaction rates. Subject knowledge, international classrooms, intercultural knowledge, and language learning are integral to the student experience in international double-degree programs. Additionally, a student's relationship with the two relevant countries, both within and beyond the universities, is equally important.

A previous study by Huang & Chen(2022) conducted similar research in Japan. However, the study did not profoundly explore differences among students from various backgrounds, and specific program or course-level experiences were not examined. This research is centered around the internationalization of higher education, while "International Program and Provider Mobility" acts as an agent. International collaborative programs form part of the international program, with students driving the overall process of internationalization. The "student experience" is crucial in cultivating a "culture of mobility." Double-degree programs can be used to assess progress in Internationalization at Home through student experiences.

While double-degree programs hold promise for promoting internationalization, addressing regulatory barriers and enhancing student support is crucial for their success. By prioritizing the student experience and fostering cross-cultural engagement, institutions can maximize the benefits of international collaboration and contribute to a more globally connected higher education landscape.

Methodology

The study used the qualitative method to conduct the research; it obtained data through open-ended conversational communication. Therefore, the semi-structured interview had been chosen as the data collection method. Due to the COVID pandemic, the 'face-to-face' interview was impossible to conduct; hence, the interview was conducted online, and the medium is English.

This research targets students selected from 13 universities inside the Type A - Top Global University Scheme in Japan. Those universities belong to the top-ranking tier in Japan and receive a large amount of financial support from the government to promote internationalization.

Participants were selected through exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. The first interviewee was invited via the university's network. Following the principles of this sampling method, the first interviewee referred the second, and the third to fifth interviewees were referred by one of the targeted universities. The sixth interviewee was referred through the MEXT's network on the internet, and this interviewee then referred the seventh participant.

All students were part of the international faculty at their respective universities. Only students A and B shared the same home university, while the other five came from different institutions. All participants had been in Japan for approximately one year or more. The interviewees' background is shown in Table 1.

For data analysis, a qualitative thematic analysis approach was chosen for its suitability in exploring complex, nuanced data such as interview transcripts. This method allows for identifying patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' narratives, thereby enhancing the study's credibility.

During the coding phase, each transcript was systematically reviewed, highlighting key phrases, sentences, or sections that appeared significant or relevant to the research questions. Codes were assigned to these segments, representing the essence of the data.

After coding, the codes were reviewed to identify patterns and relationships. This step involved grouping similar codes together to form initial themes. For example, codes related to "academic challenges" and "cultural adaptation" were grouped to form broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. The initial themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking the themes against the original transcripts to confirm their validity and coherence.

Table1 *Background information of the interviewees*

Students	Origin	Home University	University	Discipline	Gender
A	Indonesia	Indonesia	X University	Education	Female
B	Indonesia	Indonesia	X University	Education	Female
C	Indonesia	Indonesia	X University	Science	Male
D	Indonesia	Indonesia	X University	Science	Male
E	Indonesia	Indonesia	X University	Science	Male
F	Thailand	Thailand	Y University	Science	Female
G	Indonesia	Malaysia	Y University	Science	Female

Findings

This study investigates the international double degree programs offered by Japanese universities, focusing on the experiences of international students. The qualitative research aims to explore the motivations, expectations, learning experiences, and cultural challenges faced by students in these programs. The study involved seven students from developing countries who were enrolled in master-level double degree programs in Japan. The findings are categorized into three main themes:

Motivation, Expectation & Learning Experience, and Cultural Experience..

Motivations for Enrolling in Double Degree Programs

The participants expressed a range of motivations for enrolling in double degree programs. A significant motivation was the opportunity to study abroad, which many viewed as a chance to gain international exposure and enhance career prospects. Student C emphasized that the double degree would "boost my career development," citing increased financial support and better promotion opportunities as key incentives. Similarly, Student A expressed a strong desire to study abroad, which was a significant factor in their decision to join the program.

Interestingly, some participants were encouraged to join the program by their mentors or professors. For example, Student B mentioned that their lecturer recommended the program, which led to their enrollment despite not planning to study abroad initially. This highlights the role of academic mentors in influencing students' educational paths and decisions. The opportunity to gain a broader education perspective and engage with diverse academic environments was also a common theme. Student D noted the desire to gain "new experiences and perspectives from other people," emphasizing the value of cross-cultural academic exchanges.

Learning Experiences and Academic Environment

The learning experiences in Japan were generally positive, with students appreciating the academic freedom and research opportunities available. Participants consistently noted the contrast between the educational environments in Japan and their home countries. Student B, for instance, described the academic freedom in Japan as allowing for a wider range of research topics, contrasting with the more rigid and uniform research expectations in Indonesia. This sentiment was echoed by Student A, who appreciated the independent study environment and the emphasis on seminars and regular progress reporting.

The supportive role of Japanese faculty was also highlighted. Student D noted that the "sensei is very clear in their explanations," which helped students feel comfortable exploring new subjects. This supportive academic environment was a significant factor in students' positive learning experiences, allowing them to engage deeply with their studies and develop critical thinking skills. The structure of the programs, which often required students to balance coursework and research, was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for growth. Student A mentioned the rigorous nature of the program, which required them to manage a heavy workload effectively.

Cultural Adaptation and Challenges

Cultural adaptation presented challenges, particularly in terms of language barriers and social integration. While students found it relatively easy to make friends with other international students, forming connections with Japanese peers proved more difficult due to language differences. Student D mentioned the lack of Japanese students in their lab, which limited opportunities for cultural exchange. Despite these challenges, participants generally reported feeling part of the university community, with Student A expressing a sense of belonging due to the welcoming environment and support from faculty.

Language barriers were a recurring theme in the interviews. Many participants struggled with Japanese, which affected their ability to integrate fully into the local culture. Student B noted the difficulty in communicating with local residents and accessing services, such as healthcare and bank services, due to language limitations. However, participants also highlighted the efforts made by Japanese peers and faculty to bridge this gap, often using English to facilitate communication. Student C shared their experience of cultural shock, noting differences in food and social norms, but also

expressed appreciation for the opportunity to adapt and learn from these differences.

Double Degree Identity

The dual identity of being a student at both a Japanese and a home university was a unique aspect of the participants' experiences. Students navigated this dual identity in various ways, often introducing themselves as students of both institutions. Student B described the importance of context in how they presented their academic affiliation, adapting their introduction based on the audience and setting. This dual identity sometimes led to confusion or complexity, particularly when publishing research or presenting at conferences, as students had to decide which institution to represent.

Despite these complexities, most participants felt integrated into the university community. Student D mentioned feeling like a part of the Japanese University, with no significant differences in treatment compared to single-degree students. This sense of belonging was crucial for their overall satisfaction and academic success. The participants appreciated the inclusive environment and the opportunities for engagement with both Japanese and international peers.

Overall Reflections

Overall, participants rated their experiences in Japan highly, citing the opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives and develop new skills as key benefits. Student A, for instance, valued the chance to "think more widely in education" and develop critical thinking skills. The experience of studying abroad was seen as transformative, with many participants noting that it enhanced their personal and academic growth.

The challenges faced, such as language barriers and cultural differences, were often seen as opportunities for growth and learning. Participants appreciated the chance to develop resilience and adaptability, skills that they believed would be valuable in their future careers. Student B reflected on the importance of the international learning experience, noting that studying abroad provided a broader understanding of different educational systems and cultures.

Further Challenges

While the overall experience was positive, participants identified several areas for improvement. The workload associated with double degree programs was a significant challenge, with students often feeling overwhelmed by the demands of completing coursework and research for two institutions. Student D highlighted the "dense program structure," which required careful time management and prioritization.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study illuminate the complex dynamics of international double degree programs in Japanese universities, offering deep insights into the experiences of international students. These programs are instrumental in advancing the internationalization of higher education, yet they also present significant challenges that must be addressed to maximize their effectiveness and benefits.

Motivations for Enrolling in Double Degree Programs

Compared to the previous study from Huang & Chen(2022), Both studies highlight career advancement and international exposure as primary motivations for students enrolling in Japanese university degree programs. In this study, participants emphasized the role of mentors in influencing their decisions, whereas the manuscripts noted that some students were encouraged by lecturers without prior intention to study abroad. This suggests that academic mentors play a significant role in

guiding students toward international opportunities, highlighting the importance of supportive faculty in promoting such programs.

Learning Experiences and Academic Environment

This study consistently praised academic freedom and research opportunities compared to previous studies. Participants appreciated the ability to explore diverse research topics and the supportive role of Japanese faculty. However, this study provided more detailed accounts of the dual identity experience, where students navigated affiliations with both their home and Japanese universities. This dual identity sometimes led to complexities, particularly in academic publishing and conference presentations.

Cultural Adaptation and Challenges

Significant challenges were identified in language barriers and social integration. While students found it easier to connect with other international students, forming relationships with Japanese peers was more challenging due to language differences. This study offered additional insights into the specific challenges of integrating into Japanese society, such as the need for more inclusive language support and cultural orientation programs.

Double Degree Identity

The sense of belonging to the university community was a positive aspect compared with other studies. Most participants felt integrated into the university environment, despite their dual identity. However, this study highlighted the complexities of introducing oneself as a student of both institutions, which sometimes led to confusion or a need for context-specific introductions.

Despite these challenges, students generally find their cultural immersion in Japan to be positive and transformative. They value the opportunity to engage with Japanese culture, participate in traditional activities, and form meaningful connections with locals. These experiences contribute significantly to their personal and professional growth, fostering greater cultural awareness, sensitivity, and adaptability. Based on the findings and discussion, several recommendations can be made to enhance the experience of international double degree students at Japanese universities:

- 1. Enhance Language Support: Universities should provide comprehensive language support to help international students overcome communication barriers and integrate more effectively into the local community. This includes offering language courses and practical language training focused on everyday interactions.*
- 2. Foster Cultural Exchange: Initiatives to promote interaction between international and Japanese students can enrich the learning experience and facilitate cultural adaptation. Universities could organize cultural exchange events and collaborative projects that encourage cross-cultural engagement.*
- 3. Diversifying Student Recruitment: Japanese universities should explore additional strategies to attract students from Western countries and other regions to diversify the student base. Enhancing global outreach and marketing efforts, promoting the unique advantages of studying in Japan, and addressing any perceived barriers that may deter Western students is important. Strengthening partnerships with foreign institutions to create more opportunities for student exchanges and collaborative programs will enhance the global visibility of Japanese universities and attract a more diverse pool of applicants.*

4. *Fostering Inclusive Campus Environments: Implementing policies and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion on campus is vital. Creating a welcoming environment for all students, regardless of their background, and addressing any issues of discrimination or exclusion is necessary. Developing support networks and resources specifically tailored to the needs of international students, such as counseling services, peer support groups, and academic advising tailored to the unique challenges faced by international students, will enhance their experience.*
5. *Improving Administrative Support: Providing clear, multilingual information about banking procedures, financial regulations, and necessary documentation will help students navigate these processes more smoothly and reduce stress. Establishing dedicated support centers for international students that offer personalized assistance with administrative tasks, such as opening bank accounts, visa applications, and housing arrangements, is essential. These centers should be staffed with knowledgeable personnel who can provide guidance in multiple languages.*

By implementing these recommendations, Japanese universities can enhance the overall effectiveness of their international double degree programs, providing a more supportive and enriching environment for international students. These improvements will benefit the students and contribute to the broader goal of internationalizing higher education in Japan, fostering a more globally connected and culturally competent academic community.

Conclusion

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of international students in Japanese double degree programs, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the timing of the interviews, conducted between May and July, posed challenges. This period coincided with the beginning of the academic year, making it difficult to engage freshmen who had just enrolled or final-year students who had recently graduated. Additionally, most participants belonged to the October cohort, limiting the diversity of perspectives.

Furthermore, due to time constraints, the study focused only on aspects of student identification and satisfaction with the international experience, overlooking other potentially relevant factors. Lastly, the limited sample size of seven participants may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among double-degree students. Moreover, the inactive status of many double-degree programs, exacerbated by the pandemic, hindered recruitment efforts. While this study provides valuable insights, future research should strive for greater inclusivity, consider the evolving impact of global events, and address the challenges posed by program logistics and participant diversity.

Japanese universities' double degree programs offer valuable international experiences yet face challenges in cultural integration and institutional support. By addressing these challenges, these programs can better fulfill their role in the global education landscape. The recommendations include promoting more significant interaction between international and Japanese students, adopting more interactive teaching methods, and providing comprehensive language and cultural support.

Future research should explore the perspectives of Japanese students and those from developed countries to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, investigating the long-term impacts of double degree programs on students' careers and personal development could offer valuable insights into their effectiveness.

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