

Evaluating quality of the double-degree programmes developed between Japanese and European universities: from a perspective of students' experiences (0230)

Hiroyuki

Takagi

Kobe University, Japan

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In the globalisation of higher education, double-degree or joint-degree programmes have been developing among universities across countries, particularly in Europe through Erasmus programmes. The Japanese government has been encouraging the Japanese universities to offer these programmes and had launched several funding schemes including the “Top Global University Project” that aims to increase international competitiveness of Japanese universities (MEXT 2014).

In order to assure the quality of the programmes that are developed and implemented by two or more universities whose educational systems and policies are different, it is important to mutually evaluate the quality of the programmes taking into account their national and institutional differences. Otherwise no students will be attracted to take the programmes (Ninomiya 2011). There are several key elements to attain the quality assurance of the programme. It includes learning objectives, curriculum design, credit transfer system, assessment of students' achievement, examination and awarding the degree, supervision of dissertation, learning and pastoral supports (Knight 2008 MEXT 2011). The research done by Hayashi et al (2012) on the programmes that have been offered by Japanese universities and their foreign partners, however found that these elements have not been fully discussed between both parties, as the majority of the programmes have recently established with only a few students participating.

Hayashi et al (2012) suggest that it is indispensable to evaluate and improve the quality through monitoring the status of the operation and delivery of the programmes and the learning state of students. According to good practice of implementation of Erasmus Mundus programmes (EACEA 2015), it is valuable to receive evaluation and feedback on the programmes from students regularly – e.g. after each semester and the end of the programmes, as a way to maintain high quality. Besides, some institutions include student representatives in the management and evaluation structures – e.g. board meetings (EACEA 2015).

This ongoing government-funded research examines experiences and learning processes of postgraduate students of the double-degree programmes in the area of social sciences that have been offered by two graduate schools of universities in Japan and Europe – Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Students are supposed to study for two years that include at least a full academic year at the counterpart universities abroad (usually from the second semester in their first year of study) to obtain master's degrees from the two institutions.

Three research questions are set.

1. What experiences and learning processes do students undergo through the double-degree programmes?
2. How do their experiences and processes differ from others depending on their backgrounds – e.g. individual characteristics or abilities, and contexts –e.g. countries, institutions and specialties?
3. Are their experiences and learning outcomes consistent with the aims and learning objectives of the programmes and what are the reasons behind the inconsistency if there is any?

The documents analysis of the programmes such as brochures, student handbooks and syllabus of the courses and follow-up investigation on learning experiences of four Japanese students and four European students are being conducted. All Japanese students are based in universities in Japan and have currently been studying at their counterpart institutions in Europe (one in Belgium, one in the Netherlands and two in the United Kingdom by September 2015), whereas all European students who are based in universities in Europe (three in Belgium and one in the Netherlands) have studied in Japan.

Open ended interviews with the individual students and their course tutors or supervisors have three points to carry out: 1) before studying abroad; 2) after the first semester abroad; and 3) after the completion of the programme abroad. Interview questions for each point of time were set as below.

- 1) before studying abroad: purposes and motivation to join the programmes, learning history, personal abilities and attributes, application procedure and readiness for studying abroad
- 2) after the first semester abroad: adaptation to the new environment, learning experiences and progress, results of each modules, dissertation supervision, relationship with their classmates, course tutors and supervisors, learning and pastoral support, extracurricular activities, facilities, accommodations and social activities
- 3) after the completion of the programme abroad: experiences and outcomes of their studies and other activities, achievement of their own objectives, impression and satisfaction for the programme, study plan for the rest of the programme at chosen institutions and career plan

Interview data collected each time was systematically organised for interpretation through conducting data reduction to examine students' learning experiences. An in-depth analysis is carried out to find out the detailed learning process of each student and issues for the quality of the programmes that might possibly be overlooked by questionnaire survey that is mainly used by universities in Japan. Moreover, a comparative analysis and analytic generalisation of individual cases are made in order to explore measures for further development of double-degree from both context-specific and context-transcendent perspectives.

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