

Academic values at Japanese universities and the pressure for internationalisation

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This research identifies the values that underpin Japanese academia considering a national and global push towards internationalisation. In the context of policy and institutional change across Japanese universities, this research highlights academics' perceptions of prestige in relation to research and teaching, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation. We pose the question of what makes a successful academic in Japan and how this relates (or not) with the international dimension of academia. Through a series of individual and group interviews with Japanese academics, alongside reflections from international academics working in Japan, the research identified a nationalistic approach to higher education, contrasting with global, neo-liberal approaches that dominate in Western higher education contexts. Internationalisation was seen as an add-on, often superficially engaged with at universities. Finally, the research identified a policy-angle exploring an alternative approach to internationalisation, which more closely aligns with national priorities.

Full paper

Globally and in Japan, internationalisation has presented the most significant challenge and change in higher education over the last few decades (Yonezawa, 2023). This multi-phase project considers internationalisation as the ongoing process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels (Hallinger 2014). In Japan, the government has created and financed initiatives supporting internationalisation practices but the outcomes have not always been completely positive (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015). The reduced research performance is attributed to lack of funds and university leadership

has been resistant to change due to traditional values, the pre-existing national order, and power dynamics within universities (Ishikawa, 2009). This has led to widespread frustration of Japanese academia with the internationalisation agenda and the rankings process.

The decline of Japanese universities, which have a well-established academic tradition and were on top of the rankings in the early years of the race, has been frequently presented as a by-product of the rise of neighbouring China and South Korea (Yonezawa, 2021). In contrast with institutions in neighbouring China and South Korea, Japan's top-tier universities have gradually slipped down in the rankings over the past two decades. This surprised both the top tier universities and the government, as high-quality higher education had always been seen as a hallmark of Japan's education policy. Japanese academics attribute much of this to the language barrier as teaching and research publications are all in Japanese, and out of reach to the wider international academia. Elite-making initiatives were launched by the Japanese government as well, but they were implemented at a slower pace and with less financial investment. The Japanese government later realized the importance of higher education internationalization to the country's international presence, and thus began the second wave of excellence schemes that all focused on bringing English language teaching to Japanese campuses, including by flying in international academics for short periods of time.

A focus on individual academic agency can offer the opportunity for wider collective reflection on internationalisation transformation and its possible link with quality enhancement (in all higher education sectors: teaching, research and the services to the wider society). This project draws on three sources of information: 1) Literature review on Japanese careers in HE; 2) individual and group interviews with Japanese academics; 3) Document analysis on how Japanese academics are represented. We have conducted over 30 individual and group interviews, prompting them with questions to elicit perceived challenges and barriers to internationalisation and to discuss intended strategies to overcome them. Research ethics was obtained in the UK to conduct the research.

This research identifies the values that underpin Japanese academia in light of a national and global push towards internationalisation. In the context of policy and institutional change across Japanese universities, this research highlights academics' perceptions of prestige in relation to research and teaching, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). It shows how internationalisation driven by a top-down approach has led to a misalignment between domestic academic values and national/ global expectations. Internationalisation has happened superficially, with limited integration across the higher education sector. Examples were given of separate campuses engaging housing international staff and students (delivering English-medium instruction); separate courses in English; distinct hiring practices and contracts for foreign academics to be "paper mills", again writing in English. However, the research also indicated how Japanese higher education was focused on addressing domestic needs, in contrast to negative political

rhetoric about higher education, and especially international students, in Western higher education contexts.

Against the backdrop of top-down internationalisation pushes that had limited outcomes, this research informs Japanese university policy on how to harness academic values and agency held by individuals to build a positive bottom-up and positive approach towards internationalisation. The research is relevant to the Japanese higher education sector, addressing specific needs identified by institutions in previous research, as well as by the Japanese government. Second, these findings can be used to support a new approach focusing on individual agency to frame a positive approach to internationalisation through an understanding of how the “prestige economy” operates in relation to “internationalisation”.