

The Globalization of Japanese Higher Education and the FLA Core

Jim McKinley and Mathew Thompson

In the wake of the comprehensive education reforms of 2004 and the MEXT Global 30 initiative to make Japanese universities more appealing to international students it has become increasingly necessary to ask: what is university globalization? This fundamental question reveals the inconsistent approaches to this idea that have appeared in Japanese policy and pedagogy over the last two decades. Is globalization simply a matter of teaching classes in English, a “global” language? Is it achieved by the attendance of a certain percentage of international students? Is the goal to attain a specified level of worldwide renown? All of these things are undoubtedly characteristics of “global” universities, but we would argue that they are not what *make* a university global. In Sophia University’s Faculty of Liberal Arts, the development of students’ global education is realized in its Core program, where students learn—mostly for the first time—what it means to become *global citizens*. We believe that the ongoing development of the Core program is crucial to attaining the academic goals of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, and may serve as an example to other universities in Japan developing their own global education programs.

The question of how globalization should be achieved in Japanese universities is complicated by recent demographic trends. Just over a decade ago it was anticipated that, by 2009, the number of high school graduates would equal the number of available university spaces (*Nihon keizai shinbun*, July 4, 1999 cited in Kinmonth, 2005). This decrease in the student population will force universities to reconsider their acceptance criteria as well as the goals and value of the education they offer.

Given this challenging environment every university in Japan, regardless of their reputation, must ask some tough questions. Sophia University is no exception: it participates in the institutional culture that has allowed Japanese universities, for example, to be rated last among 49 national higher education systems in meeting the needs of the economy (*Japan Times*, December 26, 2001 cited in Goodman, 2005). However, because of the principles Sophia was founded upon – valuing foreign language acquisition, critical thinking skills, and the education of global citizens – it is also in a unique position to serve as a model for other universities in Japan in giving students the ability to develop the independence of thought that is necessary for global citizens.

The difficulty of tackling issues such as globalization and critical thinking pedagogy rests in the plurality of ways they have been approached around the world. Sophia and other Japanese universities have become more globally aware and increasingly distanced themselves from pedagogies in which students receive knowledge passively. Indeed, throughout Japan critical thinking has become a hot

topic in evaluating the quality of higher education. However, Japanese universities need to ask whether or not the curriculum, method, and education they provide “translates” on a global scale. In other words, will the education provided at Sophia and other universities 1) fully meet the needs and expectations of foreign students studying in Japan and 2) allow Japanese students to live and work seamlessly in other cultures? University globalization should be about systemic reform, not statistical quotas. The goal should be to provide an education that translates on a global scale, an education that creates global citizens who have the ability to think critically and problem-solve irrespective of their cultural context or the languages they speak.

Japan’s shrinking population together with the steady decline in university applicants have generated a great deal of concern about the future of Japanese higher education. Reacting to this state of affairs, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology initiated the Global 30 project with the goal of globalizing Japanese universities to make them more attractive to foreign students, in order to subsidize English language programs like the one offered by Sophia University’s Faculty of Liberal Arts. Though the project was essentially canceled late last year due to a lack of funds, Japanese universities continue to consider the possibilities of new international programs.

In order for Japan to successfully compete in the international education market, its universities must offer a product that is comparable to other universities throughout the world. Education in Japan has traditionally focused on test-based memorization, which encourages the acquisition of a standardized and quantifiable body of knowledge. This model has been well received in Japan, where society is in general agreement concerning what knowledge is necessary, but has been less successful at producing graduates that thrive overseas. Although there is no single internationally recognized standard in higher education, the acquisition of knowledge is largely considered secondary to the importance of critical thinking. Consequently, university pedagogy that focuses on teaching “how to think” has become the most sought after by international students. Given these systemic differences, the current education crisis raises serious questions about the state of higher education in Japan: What long-term goals should Japanese universities have? What, precisely, is critical thinking and how should it be taught in Japan? How can Japan successfully globalize without losing the unique character of its universities?

The Core program in the Faculty of Liberal Arts is where these questions get answered. The objective of the Core program is to consider the state of our Japanese and international students in an attempt to meet their fundamental academic needs in their development as global citizens. The courses are skills-based with a focus on academic language production, but there is much more than language skills development at stake. Instructors teaching in the Core program are dedicated to facilitating students in reaching the necessary academic skills required of them at university. Recently a faculty member from another area in the Faculty of Liberal

Arts asserted that in the Core, the instructors teach the same thing over and over again, as if active research plays no role in the design and implementation of the courses – a rather astounding assertion. The fact is courses in the Core program must continue to evolve as society evolves. What it means to study at university is in a constant state of flux as students' needs and society's expectations of them change.

Students at this stage are learning how and why to be intellectually curious – to question systems they have otherwise been taught in the past to blindly accept. The Thinking Processes course is designed to get students to consider these aspects of their academic journey through analysis and interpretation of assigned reading and writing tasks. This course suits perfectly the aim of a liberal arts education (for a history of the liberal arts education at Sophia, see Gardner, 2008). But it is not just the Thinking Processes course that focuses on such student development – it is every Core course.

Within the Core students may be placed first in introductory-level courses currently titled Basic Reading and Basic Writing. These courses are key in getting those students placed in them to build an understanding of the academic skills the university expects of them—skills they may never have learned before entering Sophia. In the reading class, students learn what it means to read critically, and to extract key information from their assigned readings. In the writing class they learn fundamental approaches to academic writing such as the writing process of brainstorming, outlining, drafting and revising. They also learn the importance and value of a thesis statement and coherence and unity in the formation of paragraphs and the essay as a whole.

Most students are not required to take the introductory courses and are instead placed directly into English Composition 1 – a course designed to mirror Freshman Composition courses in the US. Students in these classes learn a combination of the skills taught in the Basic courses, and also how to build argumentation, and support their thesis and avoid plagiarism through the practice of citing sources. The focus is on organizing ideas and learning how to write critically and *academically* (see McKinley, 2010).

In their second semester as freshmen most students are then placed in Thinking Processes and English Composition 2. While students further hone both their reading and writing skills in Thinking Processes, they are developing the ability to conduct and write up research in Composition 2. They do this through a series of different analytical writing tasks that then develops into a final research paper. The philosophy behind this is that it should prepare students for any and all writing tasks they will face in their undergraduate studies.

The last course in the Core program is Public Speaking in which students are required to perform all the skills learned in their other Core courses. It is in this course where students must especially get a grasp on what it means to assert their ideas to an active audience (see Shore, 2010). In their journey toward becoming global citizens, this course especially guides students' understanding of the need for

their rhetoric to be altered and manipulated in order to attain the persuasive results they seek.

It is not uncommon for students at the end of their undergraduate studies to look back on their four years and conclude that the courses in the Core program were ultimately the most challenging and rewarding courses. This is not because their upper-level courses were somehow less rigorous, but rather, this was the time when students experienced their steepest learning curve in smaller classes, and when they learned what it meant to be critical thinkers.

The importance of critical thinking in all levels of education has been documented extensively in Japanese and English language research. Our primary concern is not to challenge these views, but rather to get all faculty to consider the theoretical and practical application of critical thinking pedagogies in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and the Japanese higher education system as a whole, particularly in light of the changes, trends, and debates that are taking place in Japan today.

References

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