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# Globalization in Japanese Universities: A Case Study of HUSTEP

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*Abstract* — This paper examines the short-term exchange program at Hokkaido University called HUSTEP. This program is a main component of the university's globalization strategy. The core components of the program and the organizational structure are first introduced. The challenges and the achievements of the program are then examined. Finally, the program is discussed in the context of the overall university globalization process.

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## 1. Introduction

In Japan during the 1990s there was a growing awareness of the importance of universities becoming more internationalized. In the mid-2000s, Japanese national universities became independent institutions and part of the mandate was to expand internationalization efforts. Much of the emphasis at this time focused on increasing the number of international students (Rivers 2010).

There were also concerns about the imbalance between Japanese students studying abroad and international students studying in Japan (Ferdinande et al. 2013). One of the main reasons for this imbalance was due to the fact that there were few courses and programs available in English at Japanese universities (Sugimoto 2014). This led to the creation of a number of short-term exchange programs in English at leading Japanese national universities.

This paper introduces the core components of the

program as well as the organizational structure. The challenges as well as the achievements of the program are then examined. Finally, the role of the program in the context of the overall university globalization process is discussed.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 HUSTEP Overview

Short-term exchange programs were introduced to national universities in the mid-1990s to respond to the increasing needs of international students who wanted to study abroad in Japan for one or two semesters while earning credits at their home institutions. These programs aimed to not only provide opportunities for international students to experience Japanese culture and take courses at Japanese universities, but also to encourage a diversity of teaching methods to help internationalize Japanese

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faculty and students. Kyushu University, Tsukuba University, and Tokyo University were the first to establish these programs in 1995, followed by Tohoku, Hiroshima, Nagoya and Chiba Universities in 1996. Kyoto, Yokohama, Osaka, and Hokkaido Universities started their programs in 1997 (Nomizu 2001).

Hokkaido University is one of the largest and most prestigious universities in Japan. It is located on the Northern Island of Hokkaido in the city of Sapporo. The main campus is located in downtown Sapporo which has a population of 1.9 million. A spacious campus and Hokkaido's natural scenery provided students with a chance to live and study in an environment that is academically challenging and culturally stimulating.

The Hokkaido University Short-Term Exchange Program (HUSTEP) started in October 1997. HUSTEP was created as a junior-year abroad program designed to provide overseas students from affiliated universities with the opportunity to study for one year in Japan. Participants in this program have a chance to study the Japanese language, take a wide variety of courses in English related to Japan, and pursue independent study research under the guidance of a faculty advisor.

The program is a one year program made up of two semesters. Each of the semesters consisted of fifteen weeks of courses. The first semester runs from October to February and the second semester from April to August. The semesters were reversed from the regular Japanese university semesters. This was to more closely match up with the North American and European university calendars.

The students have an extended spring break from mid-February to early April. Although the program wrapped up in mid-August, the students would often remain until early September when the program completion ceremony was held. The completion ceremony was shifted to early August after a few years. This was due to the fact that many students had to return home in early August to prepare for their next semester at their home university.

## 2.2 HUSTEP Program Components

The HUSTEP program consists of a number of components. The first part is content courses in English. A second component is Japanese language courses. A third part is an independent study. The final component is cultural activities. The following is a brief description of each component.

Each of the content courses in English was offered once a week for ninety minutes over fifteen weeks. These courses were offered by professors from various faculties. The content of the courses varied. Some of the courses emphasized Japanese studies while other courses were specialized in content. Japanese students were unable to attend these courses in the first few years. Students were required to take a minimum number of English content courses both for program completion requirements and visa requirements.

One of the features of the program was that Japanese language was not a prerequisite. Thus many students came to Japan with no Japanese language ability. Furthermore studying Japanese was not compulsory. After students arrived they would take a placement test to determine their appropriate language level. A variety of Japanese language courses were available from beginner to advanced level Japanese.

At the beginning of the program, all of the students were assigned an independent study advisor whether they were taking this for credit or not. Each student was matched up with a professor from a faculty related to their major or research interest. The details often varied by the professor and faculty. In the natural sciences, this often meant students joined a professor's laboratory and participated in experiments. Social science students would usually sit in on a professor's seminar or do a research project assigned by the professor.

As part of the program, students also participated in a number of cultural activities. These activities were concentrated during a week or two at the end of the first semester. The activities included calligraphy, flower arrangement, Aikido, Japanese harp, tea ceremony, and Zazen. Each of these activities was held as a hands-on

style class for two or three hours. The cultural activities were optional and many students instead chose to travel soon after the end of the semester.

The overseas students who participated were from Hokkaido University's partner universities that had established a student exchange agreement. During the first year there were ten students from the United States and three students from Canada. The students were from various majors including Japanese studies, business, and engineering. Student's motivations for participating included learning the Japanese language, gaining a cultural experience, as well as a general interest in Japan.

Students would receive a tuition waiver at Hokkaido University and pay tuition fees at their home university during their study in Japan. Although intended for third-year students, a number of second and fourth year students also participated. In principle, graduate students were not eligible to participate.

Students participating in HUSTEP lived in university dormitories located on or near the campus. As exchange students from partner universities, the students were given priority to dormitory housing. When the program started, there were three dormitories: one coed and one each for male and female students. The dormitories varied in terms of quality and price. All of the dorms were cheaper than the cost of renting privately in Sapporo.

Students who were accepted into the program were able to receive a scholarship from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO). JASSO is an independent administrative institution affiliated with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). These scholarships were offered as part of MEXT's mandate to increase the number of international students in Japan.

In the first few years, the scholarship included a monthly stipend, a settling in allowance soon after arrival as well as return airfare. The monthly stipend of ¥ 80,000 was for most students more than enough to cover rent, utilities and daily living expenses. Students would receive the monthly stipend at the end of each month.

## 2.3 HUSTEP Organizational Structure

Before the start of the program in 1997, HUSTEP was set up by an organizing committee made up of professors from various faculties. The administrative staff handled most of the clerical duties related to the program. In the first year there was no selection process and all applicants who applied were automatically accepted and received scholarships.

Two faculty members were hired as program coordinators to run HUSTEP and started in October 1997 just as the first year of the program was beginning. Thus the first year of the program was also a learning experience for the two new faculty. The faculty worked together with the office staff and there was sometimes confusion over the delegation of duties as well as decision-making authority.

The program coordinator responsibilities included a variety of academic and non-academic matters related to the program. This included offering content courses each semester. The coordinators were also responsible for the coordinating and planning of the program. This included creating recruitment materials for the following year's applicants. The coordinators also supervised students related to academic matters.

The coordinators also advised students on personal matters that often included homesickness and difficulties in dealing with living abroad and cultural differences. The coordinators were also responsible for correspondence with exchange partner universities and applicants. After a few years, this task was delegated to the office staff with the coordinators assuming an indirect role in dealings with exchange partner universities. The coordinators also held regular meetings with the students. This included a comprehensive orientation just after the students arrived as well as orientations at the end of the first and second semesters.

The program coordinators were affiliated with the International Student Center (ISC) and were involved with various administrative activities including committees and other courses offered by the ISC. The International Student Center was made up of Japanese

language teachers and international student advisers as well as administrative staff. In 1997, the ISC had ten faculty members and ten administrative staff. The program coordinators were also affiliated with the Graduate School of Media and Communication and this entailed various additional responsibilities including teaching graduate-level courses and supervising graduate students.

Most major decisions relating to HUSTEP were decided by the International Student Education Committee which was made up of representatives from all of the university faculties and headed by the Director of the ISC. This committee met at least twice a year. Most of the day-to-day activities were carried out by the two program coordinators and administrative staff. One office staff was assigned to work directly with HUSTEP.

During the first few years, the two program coordinators visited other universities in Japan that had existing short-term exchange programs to learn more about how to improve the program. This included visits to Kyushu, Nagoya, Hiroshima, Osaka, and Chiba Universities. They would meet with professors who were in charge of the short-term exchange programs at these universities. Larger meetings with many of the program coordinators from various universities were also held once or twice a year.

An increase in the number of applicants led to the establishment of a selection committee both for accepting students and scholarship recipients. As well, many of the applicants were prescreened by their home university and had to achieve minimum academic requirements to apply although this varied by partner university.

The selection committee set up a number of acceptance and scholarship criteria including grade point average, English language ability, motivation and suitability based on a motivation essay as well as an independent study proposal and recommendation letter from their home university professor as part of their application package. As the number of applicants increased from various countries, the balance among universities and regions in applicant selection and scholarship selection was also considered.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Challenges

One of the main goals of the program coordinators was to continuously improve the quality of the program. Feedback was frequently obtained from both students and faculty through direct discussions as well as written evaluations. The following is a brief summary of some of the issues raised relating to the content courses, Japanese language courses and independent study.

The major challenges related to these English content courses were both quality and quantity issues. Many Japanese professors were hesitant to offer courses in English. Furthermore, these courses were sometimes offered in addition to the regular course load with no type of incentive. During the first few years, a few faculties provided a research allowance for professors who offered these courses. In some faculties, professors rotated teaching these courses so there was limited motivation and in some cases resentment towards offering these courses. As a compromise, some faculties offered courses taught by multiple professors and in some cases, four or five professors teaching one course.

In the early years students would express concerns about the quality of these courses. The English language ability of the professors offering these courses varied which had a large impact on the quality of the courses. Furthermore, the teaching style was different as in Japan it is common for the professor to lecture for the full ninety minutes whereas in other countries classes are often more interactive (Cobbing 2001).

Another issue related to the mismatch between student interests and type of courses offered. Many of the courses offered tended to be more specialized and in the area of natural sciences. Many of the participating students were social science majors who were interested in learning about general topics related to Japan. Thus there would be a few Japan related courses which tended to be very popular and some natural science courses which were attended by only a few students.

There were also concerns expressed by both teachers

and students regarding the Japanese language classes. Many students felt the classes were too rigid with a lack of flexibility. Students also felt that the placement test did not provide an accurate assessment and they were thus placed in an inappropriate language level class. HUSTEP was not intended as an intensive Japanese language program although in certain cases Japanese language majors would participate. This sometimes led to a mismatch in terms of student expectations.

As many of the students in this program were younger and often less motivated to study Japanese intensely compared to graduate level students, there were concerns raised by Japanese language teachers about student motivation level. There were also concerns regarding student behavior since some international students tended to be more direct and less obedient which was different from Japanese students.

With regard to the independent study, some students expressed concern that the assigned professor did not match with their major or research interests. There were also concerns about communication issues as many professors who supervised students did not speak fluent English. There was also uncertainty among students as to how they would be graded for their independent study.

As these were undergraduate students, many did not have specialized research interests which made it difficult to supervise these students. Furthermore the expectations were different compared to supervising graduate students which was the norm for most professors. Thus some professors were unsure how to supervise these students. A few professors saw this supervision as an unwelcome burden.

Students expressed various concerns about the dormitories during the first few years of the program. Students were required to live in university dormitories. Some students preferred other living arrangements such as private housing but were not allowed to move out. After being assigned to a particular dormitory, students were not allowed to switch dormitories. Some students were unhappy with this lack of choice. There were also concerns about dormitory cleanliness as well as restrictive rules such as curfew time.

The number of scholarships allocated varied from year-to-year. This created uncertainty and confusion among partner universities when they were recruiting students. As the number of students increased, this created competition among the students and only a limited number of students could receive the scholarship. Some students were thus unable to participate for economic reasons. The scholarship uncertainty was a concern for many of the short-term exchange programs in Japan (Ishikawa 2001).

### 3.2 Achievements

Although faced with numerous challenges, HUSTEP has grown and improved over the years. The program coordinators have strived to continuously improve the program. This includes addressing some of the challenges discussed above. The coordinators have been active in trying various ways to improve the quality and quantity of the program. This included obtaining input from professors and students and learning from similar programs at other universities.

One way to improve the curriculum was to ask the students what type of courses they would like to study. This led to the creation of the Contemporary Japanese Society and Career Planning courses offered by one of the coordinators, which have continued to be two of the most popular and highest evaluated courses. It also meant visiting various faculties and professors individually to discuss the possibility of more courses being added in English. It was also made possible for professors to offer these courses jointly with their regular courses so that their teaching load was not increased. The university has also offered faculty development programs to help professors offer courses in English. The focus was not only about teaching in English but also learning new teaching methods.

As this was a new program, an important aspect has been clarifying expectations of both students and professors. The coordinators held detailed meetings with the students, particularly at the beginning of the first semester to clarify expectations regarding courses,

independent study and life in Japan. They also created written guidelines for professors who are teaching courses and supervising independent study to help clarify expectations for faculty as well.

The programs coordinators also spent a great deal of time meeting with students formally and informally on an individual basis. This included both academic and nonacademic matters. This helped to deal with any issues students have before they became more serious. This also built trust and expanded the lines of communication between the participating students and the program coordinators.

Over the years, the program has expanded in terms of student numbers. The number of applicants and accepted students steadily increased over the years. Starting with only 13 students in 1997, the number increased to 103 participants by 2016. Also the number of applicants increased to 122. This also meant that the program could be more selective in terms of quality as only the best applicants were accepted.

The program also expanded in terms of student diversity. Whereas in the first year students participated from only two countries, by 2016 there were students from twenty-five countries participating. The participants were from countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Oceania and Asia. This diversity was important not only to HUSTEP but also to the university since many of the other international students at the university tended to be concentrated from a few countries in Asia.

Over the years, positive student feedback about the program also increased. The vast majority of students stated that they were very happy that they participated in HUSTEP. These satisfied students also helped to improve the image and brand recognition of Hokkaido University among partner universities. The final student evaluations were very positive and included comments such as “participating in HUSTEP was the best year of my life.”

The program has also strived to become more open and flexible. One change was to allow Japanese students and other international students to participate in these English content courses. Based on interviews with

Japanese students, this has been an eye-opening and motivating experience. A number of these Japanese students have noted that this experience has motivated them to do a study abroad with a partner university. They were also happy that participating in these courses gave them the chance to interact and make friends with international students.

Over the years, there were a number of external evaluations reviewing the university’s internationalization activities. As part of these evaluations, HUSTEP received glowing reviews from the external evaluators about its contribution to the university’s globalization process. One external evaluation referred to HUSTEP as the university’s flagship program for internationalization. Another evaluation stated that HUSTEP was a key component of the university’s undergraduate internationalization activities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The above achievements clearly demonstrate that HUSTEP has made a major contribution to Hokkaido University’s internationalization efforts. HUSTEP has played an important role in the university’s internationalization efforts by increasing the number of international students and English content courses offered. In addition, HUSTEP has also positively influenced Japanese faculty, administrative staff and students at Hokkaido University in terms of attitudes towards internationalization and diversity by broadening their perspectives. The program has also improved Hokkaido University’s image and brand recognition among international partner universities.

As MEXT and Hokkaido University have continued to revise their internationalization policies, HUSTEP has also continued to evolve in this ever changing global educational environment. Although faced with various challenges, HUSTEP has continued to grow, improve, and contribute over the years. HUSTEP has become a core component of Hokkaido University’s internationalization strategy. Future research will examine recent

HUSTEP trends and activities.

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