



留學生活に対する留學生の満足度を高める要因は何か

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Assessing Factors Involved in University-level Foreign Students' Satisfaction

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Abstract

MEXT's aim to raise the number of foreign students to 300,000 by 2020 has prompted universities to implement a new infrastructure capable of handling the increasing number of students. Among educators, there is still debate concerning the benefits and drawbacks of the current interculturalization of Japanese universities. Against this backdrop, international students at Muroran Institute of Technology (MuroranIT) were questioned about their circumstances and levels of satisfaction. Their positive responses indicate some of the factors necessary to ensure foreign students' satisfaction.

Keywords: interculturalization of universities, foreign students, level of satisfaction

1 INTRODUCTION

MEXT aims to internationalize higher education in Japan by raising the number of foreign students studying at Japanese universities to 300,000 by 2020 (MEXT et al, 2008). This current goal has put pressure on universities to create a new infrastructure capable of handling the increasing number of foreign students (Yokota, 2008). Although the recent nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi plant has brought an unexpected setback to MEXT's goal, the increases in foreign students will nevertheless continue. Some universities have been trying to integrate the additional administrative services required to handle foreign students into their educational affairs sections (教務課) or student affairs offices (学生課). Others have set up separate international offices or even international centers. However, the extent of services provided depends on the number of staff, the level of financial support, and the level of priority placed on foreign students within the universities, as well as their sizes, locations, and types. In June 2010, I (Krause-Ono) went to the Nara conference of the Intercultural Education

Society of Japan and attended the presentation of Dokkyo University's Professor Kazuhiro Kudo. Professor Kudo addressed Japanese students' experience of foreign cultures and the interculturalization of Japanese universities. His focus was on the merits and demerits of Japanocentrism with a somewhat stronger stress on the latter. This made me want to examine the circumstances and perspectives of foreign students at our university, the former state university Muroran Institute of Technology. Therefore, in February 2011, we set out to investigate them.

2 BACKGROUND

Many studies have already been undertaken with the goal of examining different aspects of internationalization and/or interculturalization at Japanese universities (Ebuchi, 1997; Goodman, 2007). A number of studies have analyzed the ethnocentric or Japanocentric situations in which foreign students are placed or find themselves (Tanaka, 1991; Hashimoto, 2000) and their reactions to their circumstances (Inoue, 2001). Others criticized the strong attention that white or Western students receive compared with Asian students (Tanaka, 1991; Kobayashi, 2010) and questioned whether there can really be an exchange on

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an equal footing (Tanaka, 1991; Kobayashi, 2010). Also, teachers of Japanese have held different perspectives towards their foreign students (Tsuchiya, 1997; Kagami, 1997).

Although aware of this ongoing research, we did not aim to address deeply the above-mentioned discourse. Rather, we wanted to find out whether there were genuinely positive attitudes in the perspectives of the international students at MuroranIT, and, if so, to analyze the reasons behind such attitudes.

MuroranIT is a technical university with about 3,300 students, of which more than 90% are male, located in southern Hokkaido at the Funka Wan on the Pacific. The university can be found at the rim of the city of Muroran. It borders woods and mountains and is surrounded by a residential area, where many students, teachers, and staff of the university live.

As has happened at many other former state universities, various departments and offices at MuroranIT went through extensive restructuring. Four years ago, the former international office was transformed into an international center. Since then, the staff has more than doubled, with five people now working in the office, and two, instead of one, Japanese-language teachers, whose offices are located next to the international center. Both of these teachers have experience living in foreign countries, and one is particularly experienced and knowledgeable about Southeast Asian countries. The head of the center is a member of the university board, and the four technical departments and the department for common subjects of the university are represented by two members each on the international center commission that holds monthly meetings. The department representatives inform their departments about ongoing internationalization activities and seek their consent and active cooperation in various matters.

Since 2007, the number of foreign students has more than doubled, from forty-five to more than a hundred currently enrolled. Unfortunately, no study has accompanied the transformation from “office” to “center.” In February 2011, we began our study to examine the circumstances and levels of satisfaction of the international students. The main aim of our study was to find out if foreign students at MuroranIT faced prevalent difficulties or problems and what factors were involved in their levels of satisfaction.

3 METHOD

For the research, we prepared questionnaires, both in

Japanese and English, that included questions to foreign students at MuroranIT about the following: their country of origin, various aspects of their daily life and their studies, their levels of satisfaction regarding the international center, and their views of their professors and Japanese peers. The author of the questionnaire and its goal of improving the university’s service to foreign students were explicitly stated, in order to reduce as much as possible any bias that might influence the students’ responses. The students responded anonymously to the questionnaire during the last two weeks of February 2011, a period deliberately chosen because many students leave the university in March. The modes of answers to the questionnaire, which contained a combination of multiple-choice answers and open comments, allowed for the assembly of both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). For example, several questions that aim to measure the levels of (dis)-satisfaction of the students leave room for open comments on the reasons for their responses. Thus, a close correlation of quantitative and qualitative data was made possible, and the results mirrored the actual situations of the students (Burns, 2000).

4 RESULTS FOUND IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Fifty-four students, or nearly half of the MuroranIT foreign students (114 in February 2011, 104 in May 2011), answered the questionnaire. This figure was a very good return for a voluntarily answered questionnaire. Nearly all the foreign students were from Southeast Asian countries, with the majority coming from China (21) and Malaysia (20). Another six students were from Korea, two were from Indonesia and the five other students were from Thailand, Laos, Egypt, Libya, and the Philippines. Most of the students (45) were either in undergraduate (25) or graduate courses (20), and the majority of them (39) have been at MuroranIT for at least one year and some up to four years or more. This means that many of the students were studying at MuroranIT with the aim of completing their undergraduate or graduate studies.

Slightly more than half of the students (28) were between 23 and 29 years old: eleven of them younger than 23; and twelve were over 29, which means that in most of the cases they were older than most of their Japanese peers. Also, 51 or nearly 95% of the students received some kind of scholarship. In particular, most of the Malaysian students (eighteen) came with a scholarship from their country. A number of students

received a scholarship from MuroranIT, JASSO, MEXT, or an institution of the community, such as the Rotary Club or an association of local entrepreneurs. Fifteen or close to 28% also held jobs on the side. Half of the students (28) who answered the questionnaire lived in some kind of housing provided by the university and 26 of them lived in an apartment rented privately. Forty or 74% reported being (very) satisfied with their housing conditions, and another 10 or 18.5% were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, rating their housing condition as 'so-so'.

The data so far shows facts and figures about the verifiable backgrounds and the circumstances of the international students. The data that follows reveals the perspectives and attitudes of the students towards the international center and their classes at the university.

4.1 About Japanese classes

There is no special English program for international students at MuroranIT. However, Japanese lessons are provided to all students, regardless of their level of proficiency in Japanese. Therefore, we decided to ask the students about their attitudes to their Japanese lessons. More than half of the students (28 or 52%) indicated the time allotted for the lessons to be just right, and ten or 18% would have liked more lessons. All the students who responded to this question were either (very) satisfied (63%) or did not give negative ratings (20%) concerning the quality of the Japanese lessons.

When asked about what they rated as good in the Japanese lessons, half of the students (26) wrote positive comments about the helpful content of the lessons, their atmosphere, and the friendliness and knowledgeability of the teachers. When asked about negative aspects of the Japanese lessons, only four out of the sixteen comments criticized the lessons. The other twelve comments were concerned with administrative matters, such as credits and the time at which the lessons take place. In most of the comments, the students regretted that because they were too busy, they were unable to attend the lessons regularly.

Interesting results can be seen in the students' self-rated levels of Japanese. One question asked about their level of Japanese upon arriving at MuroranIT, and the following one asked about their current level of Japanese. The results showed that the number of students who rated their Japanese proficiency as "able to follow class" had more than doubled, from eleven (20.4%) to 23 (42.6%).

4.2 About the international center

Fifty-two or more than 96% of the students were (very) satisfied with the services and the functions of the international center at MuroranIT. When asked what they thought was especially good, 39 students or 72% wrote comments such as these that follow. (Since some students answered the Japanese questionnaire and others the English version, we list here their original responses.):

- 親切で優しいです。
- いろんなところについてやさしくおしえてくれるところ
- 何でも問題があったら、センターにいつでもたすけてもらう。
- みんなはとても Friendly です。
- 生活についていろいろな手伝うことができました。
- 活動が多いです。たのしいです。
- 効率が高い。留学生のためいろいろ考えてくれました。皆さんはとてもやさしいです。
- 学生の特にやさしい。しんせつです。日本語がはなせない時、かんたんなことばを使います。
- 国際交流センターの先生は留学生にとっても熱情です。そして先生は私たちの生活にとっても関心である。
- Very friendly with international students. Manage works fast.
- All things inside the center is very helpful.
- They are friendly and polite.
- They try very hard to solve foreigner students' problem.
- Very friendly. Plenty of concern.

In summary, the keywords of the comments were: "friendly, concern, helping, polite, interested". These comments show that the students' attitudes towards the center did not change, regardless of whether the students were newcomers or long timers.

When the students were asked about the "not so good points" of the center, only four minor ones came up:

- お知らせがちょっとおそいです。センターの連絡より人に聞いて知ってもらうことが多いです。
- Sometimes they are very busy.
- They not often use English.
- I think I need to improve my Japanese comprehension so that I could also communicate with other staffs other than Ms.

None of these comments were critical of the attitude of the center's staff or their dealings with the students.

4.3 About acceptance by Japanese peers in class:

Thirty-four students or 63% felt accepted by their Japanese peers in class, and fifteen of them or 27% did not. The latter seems to be a high number; however,

when asked for their reason for not feeling accepted, the students' answers varied, and two of the students even stated the opposite:

- たぶん自分の問題です。いつも性格は冷たい。無愛想な人だと言われていますから。
- あまり話しません。
- 自分の感じなので、詳しい原因について知らない。
- 日本人のクラスメートは親切です。
- 日本人のクラスメートはよく親切です。
- 留学生と日本人はべつべつのかんじがします。
- 授業中で日本人友達に付きあうのはむずかしい。
- クラスでは授業を一番と思う。
- わかりません。
- They rarely speak to me. Sometimes they always tried to avoid having contacts with me.
- During group work, no one will try to talk to me, unless I start first.
- Actually it's not the feeling of not being accepted. Cause the main problem was on me, when I took class for my master degree. At that time I don't have self confident to talk in Japanese. When I try to talk in English, they seem have problem to have conversation in English.

Some students placed the blame on themselves; some of them did not see class as a place to interact with others; and others focused on language as the problem. Five students gave reasons for their feelings of non-acceptance.

In a question that followed, we asked the students if there was anything they would like their Japanese peers to do. Eleven students, or 20%, wished for the following:

- 交流することが望んでいます。
- もうちょっと留学生にきょうみをもって話かけてください。
- もっと会話すること。それで日本の文化についてもっと了解したい。
- もっと話しをかけてくれてほしい。
- 外国留学生と日本学生無差別。
- Don't treat me as foreigner.
- The Japanese people are shy in communicate with foreigner; hope they can be more easy and friendly.
- Try to learn English a bit.
- Open up their minds.
- Nothing, I think it would be better if I just try harder to improve my Japanese ability.
- Also try to be open in learning other foreign languages and cultures.

In conclusion, most of the eleven students wished for more interaction and communication with their Japanese peers or wanted them to show more

open-mindedness regarding the foreign students' language and culture. Only two students (3.7%) clearly stated that they felt discrimination.

4.4 About satisfaction with classes and the care received in the departments

Fifty students or 92.6% were (very) satisfied with the classes in their respective departments. When asked about their reasons for being dissatisfied, seven students answered. Five out of them mentioned lacking language-skills in Japanese as a reason. The students rated the care they received by their professors in their respective departments at an average of 83 points out of 100, the median being at 90 points.

4.5 Overall levels of satisfaction

Finally, we asked about the students' overall levels of satisfaction. On average, the international students rated their overall level of satisfaction at MuroanIT at 85 points out of 100, the median being at 90 points.

5 CONCLUSION

MuroanIT runs no special English program for international students, and the staff at the international office operates mostly in Japanese. The latter is rated highly by the international students, who on average stay several years at MuroanIT. The center takes care of the international students, not only in administrative matters, but also by helping them with housing issues and linking them with community organizations, such as the Rotary Club, various groups of citizens, and local enterprises, that also provide jobs for the students. The center also organizes the international students' year-round events, such as skiing trips, barbecues, various parties and gatherings with Japanese students, professors and citizens. On the Japanese students' side, there is also an "international exchange club" (国際交流クラブ), whose increase in members shows a heightened interest in communication with foreign students. The increase in the number of international students can also be attributed to the activities of several professors who, encouraged by the center, started to make connections with universities in Korea, China and Thailand. Short-stay exchanges of a week or two were organized, and they resulted in an increase in the number of long-term international students.

As can be seen by the answers of the international students, they rarely experienced feelings of rejection. They never felt being rejected for ethnocentric reasons by the staff or the professors of the international center.

In our opinion, the overall positive experiences of the international students were largely due to the following factors:

- The size, location and type of the university, which translates into: not too big, close to nature, a strong connection with the community, and a technical university with labs, where students have to study together. Especially the latter might be important when compared to other non-technical universities (Mahadevan, 2007).
- The intention of MuroranIT to strengthen links with universities abroad at various levels and to increase the number of international students. To carry out and support these plans, a well-functioning international center with a dedicated staff and professors had been implemented by the university board.
- The (intercultural) backgrounds and training of the staff of the international center.
- The strong engagement of professors of Japanese and the support of professors of other subjects.
- The support of the community provided by the Rotary Club, local enterprises and citizens and their interaction with foreign students in various ways.

We felt strongly that it was important for us to share this positive example of dealing with international students. Nevertheless, this study has the limitation of having been so far conducted using only a written questionnaire. Actual interviews would help to enhance the data. Finally, further studies at universities of the same size and type, especially other technical universities, will be necessary to pinpoint further the decisive factors responsible for high levels of satisfaction experienced by foreign students.

COMMENTS

Questionnaires as well as detailed results will be provided upon request.

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留学生活に対する留学生の満足度を高める要因は何か

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概要

「留学生 30 万人計画」が打ち出されて以降, 各大学では留学生の増加に対応する環境整備が進められているが, 大学の多文化化が進む中で生じる様々な問題も指摘されている. 筆者らは, 室蘭工業大学の留学生を対象にアンケート調査を行い, 彼らが国際交流センターの対応や周囲の学生との交流など現在の環境についておおむね高く評価しており, 留学に対する満足度が高いという結果を得た. こうした結果から, 留学生の満足度を高めるいくつかの要因が示唆された.

キーワード: 大学の多文化化, 留学生, 満足度

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