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An American Campus in Japan: Its Legacy to Society

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Although it was closed in March 2003, Minnesota State University-Akita (MSUA) had offered Japanese students a unique learning environment since 1990. In this research, the author investigates in what ways this American branch institution contributed to Japanese society by analyzing the results of a questionnaire answered by a number of Japanese MSUA alumni.

2003年3月に閉校となったミネソタ州立大学秋田校 (MSUA) は、1990年の開学以降、日本人学生にユニークな学習環境を提供した。このリサーチでは、同大学がどのような形で日本社会に貢献したのかを、かつて在籍した日本人へのアンケート結果を通して検証する。

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine in what ways a branch American campus (Minnesota State University-Akita=MSUA) contributed to Japanese society.

In order to conduct this research, a questionnaire was sent to some 300 Japanese MSUA alumni. The respondents were asked (1) what they did immediately after finishing (or leaving) the program at MSUA, (2) if the life at MSUA was useful to their studies after they transferred to another American university, (3) what degree they eventually earned after attending MSUA, (4) in what country they received their first full-time jobs, (5) if they need to use English where they currently work, and (6) if they feel the English education offered in Japanese junior and senior high schools was useful.

The results of this study demonstrate that MSUA functioned as a bridge by (1) providing the “take-off” period of time to many Japanese students before studying mainly in a four-year university located in the US, (2) familiarizing the Japanese students with American higher education, thus providing them with academic skills necessary for survival in their overseas studies, and (3) helping its Japanese alumni find employment where English is needed. Furthermore, there are implications that MSUA increased the English performance level of Akita high school students overall.

About MSUA

MSUA opened in May 1990, adopting a quarter school system; one quarter was ten-weeks long. The Japanese students were offered both ESL and General Education (GE) programs,

which were basically taught in English only. Taking the ESL placement test, each Japanese student was put in an appropriate level class (level 1, the lowest, through level 6, the highest). At level 4, the students were allowed to start taking some GE courses simultaneously. After the students completed the ESL program and earned 96 credit hours in GE, they were conferred Associate of Arts (AA) degrees and became eligible to transfer as third-year students to one of six sister campuses in Minnesota (Bemidji, Mankato, Metropolitan, Morehead, Southwest, and Winona). These institutions enabled them to pay in-state tuition. American students mainly from one of the six sister universities above were also enrolled in the GE program at MSUA.

Unfortunately, MSUA was closed in March 2003 due mainly to the shortage of students. One possible explanation for this shortage of students is that Japanese high school students and their parents took a negative view that MSUA was not an accredited institution under educational law of Japan.

Subjects

The subjects in this research are Japanese MSUA graduates who were chosen from a list of alumni roster for the 2003 MSUA alumni reunion held in Akita, organized by a volunteer group of MSUA graduates. The secretariat of the alumni reunion issued the roster, and the author referred to it in order to send the questionnaire to these alumni. The total number of the Japanese entrants to MSUA was 1,447 between 1990 and 2002, the last year of recruitment. Attempts were made to request for access to the official alumni roster. Unfortunately, the official student roster was not made available from MSUA despite repeated requests.

A total of 300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed either by post or by email. For the respondent's convenience, the CGI formatted questionnaire was uploaded in an MSUA alumni related homepage as well. Eventually, 110 respondents completed the questionnaire.

Procedure

As mentioned above, the questionnaire was sent to some 300 Japanese MSUA alumni, and the author received 110 copies of completed questionnaires. More data would have been available if the author had had access to the official roster from MSUA. To achieve the goal of finding out how MSUA contributed to society by providing education to its students, six questions were asked. These questions were formulated to elicit data on respondents' status after completing MSUA, as well as personal opinion on the kind of education MSUA has provided.

Results

Question 1

80 (72.7%) alumni transferred to a four-year university under the Minnesota State University System (MSUA), while 11 (10.0%) entered other four-year universities than the MSUA.

Question 2

As for question 2, 99 (98.0%) graduates indicate that MSUA schooling was useful to those who studied abroad later on.

Question 3

With regard to degrees earned, 79 (71.8%) of the respondents were conferred bachelor's degrees, and six (5.5%) earned

master's degrees. 15 (13.6%) were still working toward degrees at the time of the survey.

Question 4

As for employment, 70 (76.9%) MSUA graduates found their first full-time jobs in Japan while 19 (20.9%) found work in the US.

Question 5

51 (58.0%) of the respondents say they use English while working whereas 24 (23.7%) say they don't.

Question 6

72 (65.4%) of the graduates feel that the English education they received at Japanese junior and senior high schools was useful to some degree, as opposed to 37 (33.6%) who say it was not.

Discussion

The responses to question 1 indicate that MSUA functioned as a "bridge institution" before the students started studying in institutions in the US. In other words, this institution was established for those who would like to study and earn higher degrees eventually in the US. It seems the school has met the students' expectations of providing preparatory education for further studies in an MSUA institution.

The majority (98%) of the respondents admit that MSUA schooling was useful. Based on the curriculum described above, it is presumed that MSUA helped familiarize the Japanese students very much with not only American style lectures, but also with daily life on campus. As a matter of fact, there was

a regulation stating that all of the first-year Japanese students had to live in the MSUA dormitory. Some of those who said "useful" made comments that living in the on-campus housing taught them what they could do and what they could not in order to survive at American universities.

The results of question 3 show that not many of the subjects continued beyond undergraduate studies.

With regard to the data on employment obtained from question 4, it might be expected that the majority of Japanese would return to Japan for employment after completion of their academic work. However, some of those who chose to come back to Japan might also have wanted to stay in the US in order to work. For those who returned, one factor might be that they had difficulty in getting a proper US working visa. This may be an interesting topic for future studies.

Currently, English is indispensable to many people for job performance in an increasingly globalized society. The results of question 5 show that many of the employed graduates (58.0%) say that they use English while working. They seem to be enjoying the advantage which their English ability and inter-cultural skills have given them. This is one of the goals the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (=MEXT) (2003) advocates.

Question 6 asks the subjects how they evaluate the English education they received in Japanese junior and senior high schools. Those who are studying in American universities are given a lot of reading and writing assignments. The Japanese junior and senior high school English program might have helped the Japanese students by offering English reading

and writing-centered activities. Akashi (2003) mentions the importance of acquiring ability in both reading and writing to lay a foundation for better communication with people in a globalized society. Umeda (1996) also reports that more than 70% of the Japanese MSUA students stated, “The English education offered at Japanese schools was useful.” (p. 35)

On the other hand, the emphasis on reading and writing activities might have created a lack of opportunity for listening and speaking practice. This might have been the cause of disappointment for students who answered NO to the question.

In addition, according to the Akita Prefectural Board of Education (2003), the average score of Akita examinees in the subject of English in the Nation-wide Preliminary University Entrance Examination increased after the establishment of MSUA in 1990. Akita’s average score was the 4th amongst 47 prefectures in 1999. It is difficult to say whether or not this fact is directly related to the establishment of MSUA. Other factors may have been involved. However, the teacher training program offered by MSUA for Akita high school English teachers may be assumed to help improve English instruction, increase students’ motivation to study English, and consequently increase test performance. This remains to be a possible task for future research.

Conclusion

The results of the survey showed that MSUA functioned as a bridge institution by helping the Japanese students acclimatize to life in the US and contributing to preparations for higher education, mainly for American universities. MSUA provided most of the respondents with an appropriate education so

that they could smoothly get accustomed to the campus life overseas. In addition to earning degrees, training for skills and experiences in inter-cultural communication seem to have helped many of the MSUA alumni find employment where English is necessary. Furthermore, about 65% of the total number of subjects gave a positive evaluation to the English education they received in junior and senior high schools. This could be something to keep in mind when planning for reforms in current English education in Japan.

Recommendations

Akita International University opened in spring 2004. The new institution, operated by an independent corporate body, is expected to take over some of the functions from MSUA.

As for the future of foreign universities in Japan, this study suggests that for successful operation, these schools need to clearly show their prospective students their specific education goals. The lack of accreditation from MEXT might also be a problem that they should consider. However, according to Oshida (2002), today, an attractive program holds a greater appeal for prospective students than the name of a well-known college/university. In this regard, there is still some hope for a bright future for foreign universities in Japan. There is a need to support the establishment of similar institutions like MSUA in providing a unique form of education to Japanese students.

References

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Appendix

The questionnaire given to MSUA alumni and its results (an excerpt)

- Question 1:** What did you do immediately after you left/ graduated from Minnesota State University-Akita (MSUA)?
- I transferred to a 4-year university under the Minnesota State University System (MSUA).
 - I transferred to a 4-year college/university outside of the MSUA.
 - I transferred to a college/university located in an English speaking country, but not the US.
 - I transferred to a college/university in Japan.
 - I found a job in Japan.
 - I found a job overseas. (Write the name of the country/area.)
 - Other (Specify.)
- Question 2:** If you studied overseas after leaving/graduating from MSUA, do you think your school life at MSUA was helpful to your studies afterwards?
- Yes, very much.
 - Yes, a little.
 - No, not very much.
 - No, not at all.
- Question 3:** What degree(s) did you earn after attending MSUA?
- Bachelor's degree.
 - Master's degree.
 - Doctoral degree.
 - Currently working toward a degree.
 - Other (Specify.)

Question 4: Where was your first full-time job available?

- a. Japan
- b. US
- c. Other (Specify.)

Question 5: Do you need English in your current job?

- a. Yes.
- b. No.
- c. Other (Specify.)

Question 6: Do you feel that the English education offered in Japanese junior high and high schools was useful up until now, especially after you started studying at MSUA?

- a. Yes, very much.
- b. Yes, a little.
- c. No, not very much.
- d. No, not at all.