

Re-inventing International University Education
and the Role of globally engaged Universities:
Dialogues between the United Kingdom and Japan
On June 16th 2021, 18:00-20:20 (JST)/ 10:00-12:20 (GMT)

1. Introduction

Chaired by Professor Kazuko Suematsu and Professor Claire Callender, the symposium began with opening remark by Professor Akiyoshi Yonezawa, Vice-Director of Tohoku University's International Strategy Office and Special Advisor to the President voice his delight about the opportunity to host the symposium together with Professor Tatiana Fumasoli of University College London and her colleagues. she introduced the strategic partnership between Tohoku University and University College London started in 2017, giving both a historical overview of the ongoing collaboration as well as the fields of collaboration, including data science, disaster science, equality and diversity, material science, and neuroscience and aging. Professor Yonezawa additionally stressed the importance of Higher Education research as both a central field of collaboration as well as its crucial role for the collaborative efforts by both universities. Complementing Professor Suematsu's organizational remarks, Professor Yonezawa introduced the audience to the two-tiered topical frame of the symposium from a topical perspective, grouping the presentation according to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on (i) international student experience in both the United Kingdom and Japan, and (ii) the global engagement of leading universities in both countries. Following up, the co-host of the symposium, Claire Callender, Professor of Higher Education Policy at University College London, introduced the first presenter.

2. Presentation Section

2.1. Topical Block I: Is the Covid-19 pandemic changing international student experiences at universities?

2.1.1. *Changing International Experience of University Students in the UK and Europe*

Rachel Brooks, Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey spoke about research concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility. A central theme throughout her presentation was the fact that while the pandemic had acted as a magnifying glass, bringing into the spotlight certain themes, those issues had already emerged previously and were

not caused by the pandemic itself. The first emerging theme was the increasing *socio-economic diversification* of the international student demographic. Whereas the previously established notion of international students had been one of a wealthy minority, the demographic has undergone substantial diversification due to massification of higher education in general, the growth of the middle class (predominately in India and the People's Republic of China), the reduction of travel costs, the ease of communication, and increased recruiting efforts by (British) Universities. The pandemic (in particular, the counter measures) has brought to the forefront the economic vulnerability of groups which were previously unable to study abroad, as the lockdown-induced shut-down of the hospitality sector resulted in the elimination of a large part of job opportunities which were previously taken up by the international student demographic. As a result, economic hardship, mirrored in the inability to afford flights back to their home country, reliance on food banks, and homelessness, have been widespread among international students in the United Kingdom. *Geographies of student mobility* had already been shifting before the start of the pandemic, with the Anglophone nations increasingly losing their dominant status as attractive locations for studying abroad. In particular, Asian nations such as the People's Republic of China have since emerged as attractive locations, alongside regional hubs such as Turkey and other nations in Asia. Likewise, mainland Europe has become an attractive location for studying abroad as well, due to a combination to traditional low study fees and the increasing adoption of English as the lingua franca among universities. While the impact of the pandemic cannot be systematically assessed yet due to conflicting evidence from several studies, it can be observed that Chinese students increasingly prefer selecting locations closer to their home country. Likewise, the pandemic has brought to the forefront an awareness by UK universities about the risk to rely on a single country regarding the supply of international students, with the consequence of diversified recruiting efforts by those universities. *Geo-political relationships* between sending and host nations have had an influence on international student mobility, as not only exemplified by the enduring impact of the United Kingdom's colonial legacy (attracting students from its former colonies), but also by the feedback effects of occurring political disputes between nations such as Russia and the United Kingdom, or the People's Republic of China and Australia. As a concrete consequence of the pandemic, Chinese exchange students in the United Kingdom faced animosities, being regarded as representatives, and therefore responsible for their respective government's policy. In addition, several nations had imposed travel restrictions on subjects of the People's Republic of China at the beginning of the pandemic, which however have been lifted in the meantime. Regarding the *value of international education*, the speaker pointed out the different interpretation of value by individuals, states, and "the market". The pandemic has highlighted the financial value of international students for their host universities, as well as shifting values of international students

themselves. Previously primarily valuing academic issues, they now put premium on non-academic issues like public health governance or feeling welcome in the host nation. Concerning the *ethics of international student mobility*, the speaker identified a still ongoing differential treatment of domestic and international students as shown in different amount of required study fees, the ability to engage in paid work, or being subject to surveillance. In her concluding remarks, the speaker pointed out that the pandemic had not resulted in a substantial negative impact on international student numbers, but that the former has increased the urgency to tackle already emerging issues, which were not caused, but whose effect had been fueled by the pandemic.

2.1.2. *Changing International Experience of University Students in Japan and East Asia*

This presentation was given by Dr. Yukiko Shimmi and Dr. Akiyoshi Yonezawa from the Tohoku University Global Learning Center. Dr. Shimmi spoke about quantitative changes in and characteristics of international students in Japan and students from Japan overseas, taking into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, prior studies on the impact of studying abroad in the US and Europe were mentioned, and she highlighted the positive effects of study abroad on employability and generalized skills were reported in these studies. In addition, research from the EU mentions that for European students studying abroad in other EU countries strengthens their identity as Europeans. After that, she explained the results of the study on the long-term impact of studying abroad from Japan, which was led by Dr. Masahiro Yokota (Meiji University) and two presenters also joined as the research team. As the framework of analysis, she explained the concept of "Globally Minded Workforce" in Japan, along with its 3 areas of "language/communication ability," "autonomy/enthusiasm, willingness to meet challenges, cooperativeness/flexibility, sense of responsibility/mission" (which are deeply related to general skills required of new hires, i.e. basic professional abilities), and "multicultural understanding and identity as Japanese." As the result, Japanese students who had studied abroad for 3 months or longer rated themselves more highly in all 3 areas compared to those without such experience. The self-evaluations were especially high for "language/communication ability" and "multicultural understanding and identity as Japanese." On the other hand, the students tended to feel that the effect on their general professional skills was somewhat limited. Students also mentioned that while study abroad experiences strengthened their Japanese identity, while the increase in their sense of identity as Asian and/or global citizens was limited. With the number of Japanese university enrollees who study abroad on an upward trend recently, the presenters suggested that providing international learning in Japan before and after studying abroad could maintain/supplement its impact.

Professor Akiyoshi Yonezawa introduced the audience to the impact of the pandemic from a chronological perspective, as well as the stratified ability of Japanese University to quickly shift

their educational services to online-based education. In general, a full and effective shift to online-only classes was only successfully operationalized by large comprehensive universities with a developed IT infrastructure. Additionally, the speaker pointed out the current strategy of Tohoku University regarding the provision of educational services (including student counseling) to both domestic and international students. Moreover, several new strategies by both Tohoku University and Japan as a whole were introduced, including the US-Japan Collaborative Online International Learning (which had already been established before the pandemic, but has since then increased in importance), and Tohoku University's own "Be Global" model, conceptualized by the host of the symposium, Professor Kazuko Suematsu and her colleagues. The concept draws on the Virtual Exchange concept. In contrast to the virtual mobility concept, which attempts to transplant the pre-COVID international study experience to an online-based model, Virtual Exchange is a wider concept, and envisions educational activities and interaction between groups of different cultural backgrounds, supported by both educators and information and communication technology. This concept is partly integrated into Tohoku University's Connected University Strategy, in its educational and research concept, as well as its co-creation enterprises in collaboration with industry and society, and the university management itself.

2.2. Topical Block II: How is the pandemic changing the global engagement among leading universities?

2.2.1. *The Role of Universities in Promoting Sustainability as a Shared World Challenge*

Following this, a presentation by Professor Jing Liu and Professor Tristan McCowan covered Tohoku University's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals framework. After an introduction to the concept of SDGs and its connection with higher education (as mentioned in goal 4.3), the speaker drew upon Tohoku University's history as being the first Japanese University to accept female students, thereby highlighting its progressive nature. Moreover, the current strategic plan of Tohoku University (Tohoku Vision 2030) was introduced, with its components education, research, community co-creation and governance reforms, all based on Tohoku University's traditional principles of research first, open doors, and practice-oriented research and education. From those two points of departure, the SDG framework and Tohoku University's strategic plan, the speaker gave a detailed overview of Tohoku University's operation. In the realm of research, Tohoku University conducts a large amount of research projects with social impact, COVID-19-related research, as well as sustainability-related projects facilitated by third-party funding. In addition, after introducing the number of international students at Tohoku University, including gender proportions as well as the funding source, the speaker introduced the educational

services related to the SDG framework from a perspective of institutional development (Graduate Schools and departments). While originally, a focus was placed on environmental issues, this institutional development is increasingly more interdisciplinary driven. Regarding curriculum, Tohoku University provides a substantial number of courses related to sub-concepts of the SDG framework, as well as climate change and other environmental issues. Additional remarks were made about campus operation, including the yearly publication of an environmental report since 2006, a dedicated university-wide environmental policy since 2010, and a declaration of plastic smart since 2019. Engagement with the community takes place through open lectures. Those lectures are either open to the general public or specifically for high school students. Lastly, Tohoku University has started implementing a mass vaccination program.

2.2.2. World Leading Universities and Global Engagement under/post Pandemic

The last presentation was given by the UCL leader of the ongoing collaborative research project between the two universities, Professor Tatiana Fumasoli, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Studies at University College London. Topically, the presentation covered the expanding role of global engagement of University College London, as mirrored in its strategic plan. Methodologically, the speaker employed a comparison of the university's strategic plans from 2006 till 2019. While the topic of global engagement was originally absent in 2006, it was introduced in 2011, limited to "the promotion of global understanding and co-operation". By 2014, the issue had expanded in its importance, now containing a comprehensive approach to global engagement "in all [of UCL's] activities, from research, teaching and learning to enterprise and community engagement". In 2015, global engagement was formally institutionalized through the establishment of a Global Engagement Office, before expanding its scope again in 2016, where "UCL's Global Engagement Strategy [had been] designed to increase our global impact and puts partnerships of equivalence at the heart of everything we do". By 2019, the Global Engagement Office's role in UCL's strategy had been elevated again in its strategic plan, robustly linking it with the university's overall strategic concept. Following this, the speaker introduced the audience to the Global Engagement Index created in 2015 as a measure to assess the degree of Global Engagement of Universities in the United Kingdom. Through its 30 different measures, the index focuses on Higher Education engagement, global student mobility and transnational education. As parameters, the index is sub-divided into (i) student engagement, encompassing geographical diversity, student success, study abroad and internationalization at home, and (ii) institutional infrastructure, consisting of academic staff, environmental impact, sustainable development, international engagement and research. As concluding remarks, the speaker elaborated on the issue of Global Rankings and focused on possible tensions related to global engagement being limited to a few

of large research universities, as well as the paradox of competition and cooperation among universities in the global reputational race. The speaker closed her presentation by urging a better balance of competition and cooperation and also stressed the potential capabilities of research universities in leading the post-pandemic transformational change.

3. Panel Discussion and concluding remarks

Kicking off the panel discussion, Professor Fujio Omori gave thought-provoking comments on university education in general against the backdrop of the pandemic. Firstly, he stressed the importance of the local base for universities as a point of departure for global engagement citing as crucial dimensions (i) internal governance (institutional organization and capacity), (ii) external governance (the national regulatory framework) as well as (iii) the degree of public and political support. Secondly, the speaker pointed out the impact of the pandemic more generally, invoking the decline of globalism, the issue of unequal distribution of vaccines, and restricted mobility. Thirdly, the speaker assessed that the pandemic had accelerated the digital transformation of education. As a potential explanation, the speaker invoked a concept from international relations research. Securitization theory states that the social construction of a *perceived* threat can be utilized to build consensus regarding counter measures that are geared at tackling this perceived threat. Against this backdrop, public debate, democratic decision-making processes, and opposition in general can be bypassed. Applied to education, so the speaker, the rapid shift towards online education is justified by the stated goal to counter the threat of infection (through personal gatherings like face-to-face classes), thereby facilitating sudden change in educational concepts (which are usually polarizing issues and subject to heated debate, rendering sudden and radical change infeasible). Shifting the focus from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to challenges for universities in general, the speaker first pointed to the risk of complacency. Through adaptation to and compliance with external events, universities would not play an active role in facilitating transformation of the world. Moreover, against the backdrop of universities' responsibility to educate future leaders, it was questioned whether universities fulfilled that mission, equipping students with employability and citizenship. The concern was voiced that students, through university education, may be conditioned to adapting to society, rather than learning to actively transforming it. Lastly, the speaker pointed out the long-established criticism regarding universities, namely their simultaneous ability to explain the past while not being able to "create the future". Professor Ohmori closed with the final concern whether universities could be flexible enough to exchange knowledge and talents with other social and economic institutions.

Dr. Victoria Showunmi, lecturer at the Institute of Education at University College London, joined the panel discussion, opening with an expression of gratitude to the presenters for their diverse

approaches to the subject. Widening the frame of the discussion, she urged to consider the impact of a changing higher education system on the wider community, rather than narrowly addressing the direct impact of the pandemic on higher education itself. Moreover, while acknowledging the frame around the definition of an international student, she pointed out an implicit hierarchy of students, consisting of a demographic that was supported to become global, and another demographic that was struggling to be invited to be international. From this point of departure, she put up for discussing if there was an ideal type of international student that was desired by the host country, leaving those that did not fit into a model minority conception behind. Regarding the presentations around the Sustainable Development Goal framework, she identified a possible disconnect between two integral parts of the concept, i.e. internationalization and the environment. Was it possible, so Showunmi, to become international by merely studying from home, or was an actual physical engagement with the environment crucial to fill the concept of internationalization with life? Lastly, directing the attention to Professor Fumasoli's presentation, she urged to take into account a social justice perspective when employing the Global Engagement Index, and added the question if universities would attract a truly diverse demographic of international students regarding gender, race, sexual orientation or age, or if Global Engagement would only target a particular group of desired international students.

Adding to the discussion, Tristan McCowan, Professor of International Education at University College London, reminded both the panelists and the audience that universities did not function on a command-and-control structure, but rather should combine leadership (setting an institutional vision and promoting synergy effects) and bottom-up approaches (including both academic staff and students). In addition, responding to a question from the Japanese audience if public awareness about the SDG concept was as wide in the United Kingdom as it was in Japan, he stressed that, even though there was no substantial public awareness of the comprehensive concept, various aspects, particularly climate change was prominent in the public discussion in the United Kingdom.

Drawing of Professor Brooks' presentation about the geopolitical impact of the pandemic on international education, a fruitful discussion ensued between various panelists. Professor Brooks herself pointed out that overall, geopolitical tensions got translated into concrete worries of international students about for instance public health governance and racism. In addition, she mentioned that the UK government had revised its international higher education strategy, and identified China again as an important target market, thereby indicating continuity, rather than change. Professor Yonezawa added the Japanese perspective, focusing on the realm of research. As Tohoku University stressed research, so Yonezawa, the geopolitical situation had had disruptive effects on the institution. Indirectly linked to US policy, which stressed the importance of protection of intellectual property and research outcomes, researchers from specific countries could not

be allowed their entrance to the laboratories. In contrast, current geopolitical turmoil notwithstanding, the traditional relationship between China and Japan was characterized by both a high degree of interdependence as well as a shared understanding of being part of an Asian civilization. Therefore, student exchange between the two countries would continue, also to foster mutual understanding as a measure of resilience against short-term geopolitical tensions. As a Chinese researcher working in Japan and therefore directly affected by the current situation, Professor Jing Liu gave insightful comments about the increasing involuntary entanglement of Chinese researchers in the political conflict, citing several occasions of censorship in the United States of America. Adding the individual perspective of students, Professor Yukiko Shimmi experienced a continuously high interest of both Japanese and Chinese student to interact with each other, regardless of the current geopolitical situation. Therefore, she stressed the importance of higher education in continuing facilitating this international and interpersonal exchange.

As an additional point of discussion, Professor Claire Callender asserted that, while the term internationalization implicated diversity, the latter would not automatically encompass inclusion. In other words, an international student body did not necessarily constitute an inclusive student body, as shown for instance in a lack of interaction between international students with local students. Therefore, Professor Callender asked how the congruence of an international with an inclusive student body could be ensured. Entering the discussion, Professor Fumasoli acknowledged the issue, citing her own experience of a seminar with a solely Chinese demographic as participants. While being *de jure* international, she questioned the international study experience for the participants. In addition, she pointed out the matter of study fees, as higher education systems with a low-to-no-fees policy were able to engage in a much broader discussion about the concept of diversity, whereas systems relying on study fees were substantially hampered in their discussion frame due to (economic) practical constraints. Professor Showunmi added to this the importance of firstly defining the term “diversity” as the precondition for any practical discussion. Furthermore, she stressed the importance of the gender perspective as well, as the pandemic had disproportionately impacted the female researcher demographic. Connected to the point of inclusivity, she urged to take into account issues related to visa restrictions, study fees, and the acceptance of diverse of students.

Opening an additional strand of discussion, Professor Yonezawa drew on comments by Professor Ohmori about the potential inability of universities to actively take part in transforming society. Regarding societal change, Japanese universities were indeed slower than general society, in stark contrast to universities’ claim to taking up leadership in societal progress. Addressing comments by Professor Showunmi, Professor Yonezawa acknowledged the presence of a hierarchy among international students in Japan, though along different lines than classically conceived in the West. Lastly, he pointed to the challenge of utilizing a bird-eye view on the aforementioned issues. As

most institutions and people were not located at the top of a particular hierarchy but rather in middle, they would find themselves restricted (both in their capabilities as well as their mindset) in a position between pressure from below and aspirations to the top.

Wrapping up the panel discussion, Professor Claire Callender expressed her gratitude to her fellow colleagues from both Tohoku University as well as University College London. In addition, she positively emphasized the professional performance of the interpreting service, indicating the feasibility of the dual-language format also for future symposia.

Professor Fumasoli opened her final remarks by expressing her delight for the opportunity to showcase the ongoing research collaboration between Tohoku University and University College London through the symposium. She stressed that the transformation of higher education due to the pandemic was a great opportunity to rethink higher education in general, breaking out of its often-criticized reactive role towards a position of intellectual leadership. Lastly, Professor Fumasoli informed the audience about details of the ongoing research project between both universities regarding crisis management, with the pandemic as an illustrative case study. In this context, she brought to attention that Tsinghua University had recently joined the project as well. She closed her remarks with an expression of gratitude to the audience for attending the conference.