

Japan opens its doors to students

Responding to intense competition for English language students within Asia, some of Japan's universities are innovating in an attempt to become regional leaders. The result is an increasingly multicultural look to campuses that were once only accessible to proficient Japanese speakers. **MATTHEW KNOTT** reports.

On the picturesque island of Kyushu, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) is Japan's first fully bilingual institution. The campus opened in 2000 as a joint venture between Beppu city, Oita prefecture and the historic, Kyoto-based Ritsumeikan Institute, seeking to foster active community leaders and promote the internationalisation of Japanese universities. The international student population constitutes a remarkable 44.8 per cent of the total and, with a similar ratio of foreign teaching staff, local residents have dubbed it "a small United Nations".

Yuko Goto, head of public relations at APU, believes such an environment is unique. "It constitutes a multicultural and multilingual campus unprecedented in other Asian universities and this feature fascinates prospective students," she says. Goto also highlights APU's accessibility to a global clientele: "We can accept international students who cannot speak Japanese at the time of their enrolment and we have a system of admissions in both April and September," she relates. Students also benefit from outstanding modern facilities in a beautiful area renowned for lakes, mountains and hot springs.

A trend towards internationalisation is not confined to relatively new ventures, however. The prestigious Tokyo-based Waseda University celebrated its 125th anniversary last year and claims the highest international student population in Japan of 2,435.

One of the principle reasons for this has been the establishment of the School of International Liberal Studies (Sils), where students can pursue a diverse English-taught Liberal Arts curriculum. The four-year course features a compulsory core of subjects, intensive language classes and a year abroad at a partner university and a third language. A one-year programme is also available for students.

Paul Snowden, Dean of Sils, suggests the key benefit of the course to students is the encouragement of good decision making. "We believe that [students] will grow into responsible, clear-thinking citizens of the world," he asserts. The Sils department has certainly been a hit with an annual enrolment increase of 15 per cent and with four times as many international students as any other department. A further demographic shift is the rate of 61 per cent female undergraduates, another campus-wide high. Buoyed by this success Waseda is launching an 'International Student Programme without Japanese Language' in the School of Science and Engineering from April 2009.

Waseda and APU represent the leaders of a clear national trend towards opening academic borders by teaching in English; international students in Japan traditionally pursued Japanese-taught graduate degrees at flagship public institutions. Now, the number of international students in Japan has more than doubled in 10 years to 118,498 in May 2007, increasing Japan's share of the global market to five per cent, according to OECD statistics.

A combination of factors explains this increase. A move towards English-medium study at tertiary level is emblematic of shifts across the whole education spectrum in Japan as it reflects its role in a globalised world. English is now compulsory for children in elementary school onwards, with more native English teachers available, and private language schools offering

lessons for all age groups, including toddlers.

Increasing economic prosperity in Asia – notably China – is one clear business accelerator. Japanese institutions are undoubtedly benefiting from the expanding Chinese middle class, whose students comprise a massive 60.2 per cent of the total, while Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam all recorded double-digit increases on their numbers in Japan in 2007.

Culture also plays a part, with manga, movies and music contributing to a "cool Japan" image. Neighbourly relations are cordial, and the China-Japan Youth Amity Exchange was recently launched at Waseda University before the countries' respective prime ministers. APU's Goto also cites Japan's declining birthrate – the number of 18 year olds fell 35 per cent between 1990 and 2007 according to OECD figures – as precipitating a wider trawl to fill campuses for some universities.

There has also been a substantial effort by the government to increase the academic flow into Japan. In January, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda announced an ambitious target of 300,000 overseas students by 2020 as part of a global recruitment strategy. And since its establishment in 2004, the Japan Student Services Organisation (Jasso) has focused efforts on attracting and integrating students and promoting exchanges.

One of Jasso's roles is the distribution of scholarships, and this is another area that has made Japan attractive. Course

fees are competitive in comparison with Europe or the USA – with no cost differentiation between home and overseas students – while opportunities for scholarships provide further financial respite. Waseda University, for example, offers numerous schemes such as the Partial Tuition-Waiver Scholarship that provides international students with as much as 300,000 yen (US\$2,767 approximately) per year, with around half of international students on some form of financial assistance. And nationally, a record high of 10,020 international students are currently in receipt of a Japanese government (MEXT) scholarship.

In terms of marketing strategies at individual institutions, both Waseda University and APU have established presences in their most prolific client-providing areas. APU has a total of 10 global offices and staff visit about 20 countries each year to directly recruit. Waseda University carries significant name recognition with 511 partner institutions, has offices in China, Singapore and Korea and an online Cross-Cultural Distance Learning Programme, while Sils augments this with regular workshops, most recently hosted in Korea, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and multilingual web information. Japanese institutions are a growing presence at education fairs, particularly in China, and are turning more to international agents for assistance, as well as targeting secondary institutions abroad and language schools in Japan.

As for potential new markets, Goto explains that APU has already accepted 104 nationalities, "but we have plans to nurture human resources cooperating with countries in the Middle East."



PHOTOGRAPH: JNTO

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