

# Opportunities and Challenges of University Studies in a Globalized Era

## – Inspirations Drawn from a Visit to Universities in Japan

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When writing this article, I am on a train to Kansai International Airport from Namba, downtown Osaka. This one-hour journey marks the end of a series of university visits organized by our school, in which we have had the opportunity to meet with the directors of the international programs in a number of universities in Japan. One apparent message that has emerged from our conversations is the fact that universities

around the world now seem to be committed to the internationalization of their programs. While the world is pulling our next generation with attractive scholarships and promising prospects, many students are also pushed by their parents to pursue university studies abroad. However, with the many opportunities provided, what could be some of the challenges that lie ahead?

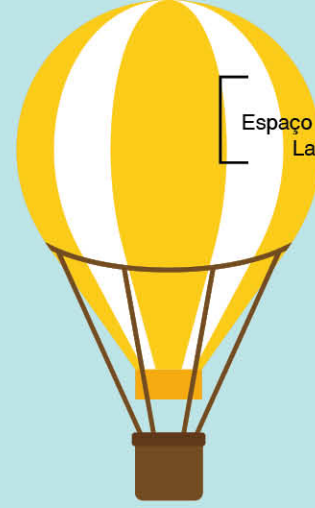
In this globalized era, university education

is no longer a privilege; instead, it has become a basic requirement for job hunting and career development. It is predicted that many jobs will be taken up by robots in the near future. Therefore, it will be an added advantage if students can optimize the limited time they have during their university years to better prepare themselves for the future challenges. Transdisciplinary studies has become a trend in academia in recent years. There is the possibility that some capable and well-qualified students can take a minor degree or even dual degrees within their four years of study. Take the Chemistry-Biology Combined Major Program of Osaka University as an example. The program offers in-depth knowledge and skills for interdisciplinary research in both chemistry and biology, enabling the students to pursue expertise in either or both fields in their postgraduate studies and future careers. The emergence of such interdisciplinary programs as Medicine and Society, Green Engineering, Global Citizenship, and Mathematics and Computer Science, embodies the significance of collaboration among different disciplines. But why is transdisciplinary collaboration so important? It is believed that students with a transdisciplinary mindset are able to flexibly think from multiple perspectives when handling real-life problems. Therefore, it will be the best of both worlds if students can acquire integrated knowledge and interdisciplinary research skills in this ever-

changing and competitive world.

The latest Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) world university rankings have just been released and many universities that are climbing the ladder faster than others take the advantage of their higher proportions of international students. What comes with this process of internationalizing the university population are more frequent cross-cultural exchanges. For example, in both Osaka University and Nagoya University, where we had the honor to exchange ideas with the international program directors, the number of international students amounts to around 10%. According to one of the directors' observation, while the international students try to learn the local language and culture in order to mingle with their local counterparts, the Japanese students also express eagerness to learn their foreign languages and cultures. This is also happening all around the world, including Macau. If you pay a visit to the University of Macau, you will not be surprised to come across international students wherever you go on campus. In such a culturally diverse environment, students' open-mindedness, adaptability and cultural awareness become particularly essential. For example, people from certain Western cultures regard direct eye contact a symbol of friendliness and intimacy, whereas it will only make your interlocutor embarrassed in Asian cultures like Japan's. Without sufficient knowledge of





cultural differences, or sometimes taboos, students may find it difficult to communicate and maintain connections with their international schoolmates. History can repeat if students fail to develop cross-cultural competence before they join the workforce.

On a personal level, it is also in university that the transition from adolescence to adulthood takes place, not only physically, but also cognitively, emotionally and socially. If you ask university freshmen what the first thing they have to learn is, many may refer to the urge to be independent. The good news for them may be that many overprotective “helicopter” parents finally learn to, or have to, let go while many university teachers are substantially less strict compared with high-school teachers. But the irony is that many parents and teachers are left disappointed. Such problems as absenteeism, procrastination, late submission of assignments and the free-rider issue are not infrequently seen. Is the parents’ and teachers’ expectation that students are self-directed and responsible simply an illusion? What can be done to demystify it? I think the occurrence of this mirage originates from the gap that lies between the students’ unpreparedness and their superiors’ unrealistic expectation. On the one hand, teachers and parents should not forget the fact that it has only been a summer since the students’ graduation. How can they expect the students to be

transformed over night? On the other hand, students should take the initiative to discuss with their parents, teachers, senior students, or even counselors, if necessary, in order to effectively cope with these bad habits, which may have been formed throughout their earlier lives. Many students believe that university is a magical place that offers them so much freedom and they are only accountable, to some extent, to themselves. This is partially true, as academic failure, for instance, does not necessarily lead to a critical consequence, but in their future job, a failure is a failure, meaning incapability and potential unemployment. Thus, why not do a complete makeover – one that transforms your bad habits into good ones before they become incorrigible?

Many of my colleagues and friends have the impression that fortune smiles on students nowadays as they have way more opportunities than those in the past. Every man, however, is the architect of his own fortune. If the student is not equipped with a transdisciplinary mindset, multi-cultural understanding, and emotional, intelligent and social maturity, the chances will simply slip away. At the end of the day, waste is worse than loss, as Thomas A. Edison put it.