

Japanese Studies in Japan: A View from Hokkaido University's Modern Japanese Studies Program

Philip Seaton¹

Hokkaido University

Hokkaido University's Modern Japanese Studies Program (MJSP) is a four-year bachelor's degree preceded by a six-month Intensive Japanese Course for those without the Japanese language skills necessary to enter the bachelor's degree directly. The first MJSP students matriculated in April 2015 having arrived in Sapporo in October 2014 to take the Intensive Japanese Course. MJSP admits 20 students per year and recruits globally.

The primary feature of MJSP is that it is bilingual and not simply a degree program in English. Studying Japanese studies at a Japanese university gives students the significant advantage of being able to "live their degree" by immersing themselves in the culture and language they are studying. Students must gain credits in discipline-based classes in both the English and Japanese languages in order to graduate.

The most obvious skill gained on MJSP is fluency in the Japanese language. But, MJSP also focuses on discipline-related skills. For example, historians are skilled at finding and evaluating primary sources, critically analyzing secondary sources, and combining these sources to create a narrative account of the past. Students are also actively encouraged to get out of the classroom and into the library and/or local community. Project Study is a defining feature of MJSP. It makes up 20 of the 127 credits required to graduate from MJSP. Students are required to produce four substantial pieces of individual work over the four years, for which they receive one-on-one supervision in all four years of MJSP.

MJSP is rooted both geographically and educationally in Hokkaido. The indigenous Ainu people have a strong presence in the curriculum. There is a compulsory course called "Multiculturality in Japan" with lectures about Hokkaido history and Ainu heritage. Another feature is that MJSP eschews pop culture as a pillar of the curriculum. There are no specific classes dedicated to manga, anime, or any other of the cultural forms that are so important for triggering young people's interests in Japan. An emphasis on pop culture can create false expectations about MJSP being "lightweight" when in reality

¹ Philip Seaton is a professor in the Research Faculty of Media and Communication, Hokkaido University, and is convenor of the Modern Japanese Studies Program. His website is www.philipseaton.net and he may be contacted at seaton@imc.hokudai.ac.jp

it is extremely tough. Furthermore, MJSP is organized around disciplines rather than topics. Manga is discussed, therefore, as one element within Japanese history, culture, society and political economy, and not as a stand-alone topic.

A team of faculty members specifically qualified to deliver MJSP was assembled. Very often, Japanese universities cobble together programs for international students using classes taught by existing faculty, or they build programs around contract staff hired using temporary funds. In MJSP's case, six tenured staff and two contract lecturers were hired as the core MJSP faculty. Research is integral to MJSP. All the staff have strong research backgrounds and possess networks that open doors for their students via Inter-university exchanges or the MJSP Guest Lecture Series.

Having designed a curriculum and hired the staff, the final step was to find students to take the course. The key issue was how to get information into the hands of people who *would* be interested in studying in Japan *if only they knew* what the options were. But finding these people is like finding a needle in a haystack. The primary recruiting tool is a well-designed online presence: both a dedicated program website and social media strategy. MJSP invested a lot of time and resources in both. Even so, programs like MJSP remain isolated. Japan needs, but does not yet have, an effective national system or portal site for recruiting international students.

Japan has a lot to offer the international world of higher education. Its degree programs aimed at international students have faced a number of problems, but as the costs of higher education soar in some other countries (particularly the US and UK), more reasonably-priced degree programs in English, such as those in Japan, will gain ever more attention. However, the experience of the last 7 years since the launch of the Global 30 initiative shows that Japan still has a long way to go before it can maximize its potential. In this endeavor, Japanese universities should have a clearer vision of what contributions they can make to global higher education and work together to build the structures (such as for recruiting) necessary to achieve them.