

# Japan's English Medium Instruction Policy Evolution in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Japan's English medium instruction (EMI) started early and developed rapidly with the support of government policies, rapidly improving the internationalization of its higher education. However, Japan's one-size-fits-all mandatory policy does not take into account the English proficiency of teachers and students, the features of the curriculum, and the lack of corresponding support. This has posed several challenges for both teachers and students.

**Keywords:** English medium instruction; Internationalization of higher education; Japanese higher education; First-class universities

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## 1. Introduction

English medium instruction (EMI) refers to teaching professional courses in English in countries (or regions) where the first language is not English. In Japan, EMI is one of the most effective strategies for the internationalization of higher education. Scholars have discussed the Japanese government's EMI policy and focused on the TGUP project and found that EMI policies significantly increased the number of EMI courses <sup>[1]</sup>. In-depth text analysis and semi-structured interviews have been performed to investigate the effect of EMI policies at the university and teacher-student levels and found that there is a significant deviation in the implementation of EMI policies at the university level <sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. The evolution of Japan's EMI Policies

### 2.1. At the government level

The aging population and decreasing birth rates have led Japanese universities to face an increasing shortage of students. Therefore, the Japanese government has launched a series of new higher education policies since 2008. The initial goal was to attract international students to overcome the shortage of students in Japanese universities. Then it developed into multidimensional goals, including encouraging Japanese students to study

abroad, promoting the internationalization of Japanese higher education, and improving the international ranking of Japanese universities.

### **2.1.1. The “Global 30 Project”**

In 2008, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda announced the “Global 30 Project,” which aimed to recruit 300,000 international students by 2020. The project provided annual funding of 200 million to 400 million yen to 13 selected “internationalization pilot universities” for five consecutive years, including 7 public universities, as well as 6 private universities, to promote EMI <sup>[2]</sup>.

Through the “Global 30 Project,” a total of 150 EMI degree programs have been established for international students. From 2008 to 2013, the 13 universities sponsored by the program increased their enrollment of international students from 16178 to 22883, which was a total increase of 41.45%. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology praised the EMI course and believed that it effectively solved the biggest problem for international students studying in Japan — the language barrier <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, the Global 30 Project is only aimed at international students, and Japanese students are unlikely to benefit from it. In the 2012 government evaluation, it was found that the EMI courses did not meet the expected goals. There was a total of 16871 EMI courses offered in Japanese universities, which was much less than the original plan of 23700. Consequently, the Japanese government recognized EMI courses alone do not appeal to international students enough without effective enhancement of comprehensive education and research capabilities.

### **2.1.2. The “Inter-University Exchange Project”**

In 2011, the Japanese government launched the “Inter-University Exchange Project,” also known as the “Reinventing Japan Project,” with the goal of attracting excellent global human resources to rebuild Japan’s competitiveness. This project mainly promotes the two-way flow of international and Japanese students through inter-university exchange programs, credit exchange, degree recognition, and the EMI curriculum system. In 2011–2016, Japan established a total of 92 inter-university exchange programs, each of which was funded by approximately 40–120 million yen. Partnerships were established with China and South Korea through the “Asian Campus Plan” in 2011, with American and European universities through collaborative education in 2012, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2013, with Russia and India in 2014, and with universities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Turkey in 2015. Between 2009 and 2014, the number of Japanese students studying abroad through the “Inter-University Exchange Project” increased from 36302 to 81219.

Under the “Inter-University Exchange Project,” EMI courses started to recruit Japanese students. Through fiscal appropriations and funding, the Japanese government continued to develop EMI courses for Japanese students. At the same time, the Japanese government also requires international students to learn the Japanese language and culture while participating in EMI degree programs to facilitate them in finding jobs in Japan. The “Inter-University Exchange Project” not only achieved two-way international exchange among students, but also initiated deeper cooperation between Japanese universities and world-class universities through extensive teacher participation, joint discussions among students from multiple countries, and expanding international perspectives.

### **2.1.3. The “Go Global Japan” project**

Japanese students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have shown a certain tendency towards localization, which may be attributed to the depreciation of the Japanese yen and income decline caused by the continuous economic

recession in Japan, the low employment competition brought about by the decrease in labor population, and the preference of Japanese domestic enterprises for local graduates. After the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011, many overseas students returned to Japan. The number of students studying abroad continued to decline from 82945 in 2004 to 57501 in 2011, decreasing by 30.68% [3].

The continuous decline in the number of Japanese students studying abroad is clearly contrary to Japan's goals of educational internationalization and economic globalization. In 2012, the Japanese government launched the "Go Global Japan" project, also known as the "Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development," with the main goals being educational internationalization and increasing the number of students studying abroad. This project provided 140 to 260 million yen annually to 11 A-class universities for 4 years to support educational internationalization and encourage Japanese students to study abroad; 120 million yen was given annually to 31 B-class universities to promote their overseas study programs. This plan mainly offers EMI courses to Japanese students to promote their overseas studies. In 2016, the number of Japanese students studying abroad increased to 96614.

#### **2.1.4. The "Top Global Universities Project" (TGUP)**

In 2014, the Japanese government launched the TGUP, a large-scale investment program aimed at enhancing the international compatibility and competitiveness of Japanese higher education, prioritizing support for world-class and innovative universities that can lead to the internationalization of Japanese higher education. The Japanese government provided funding mainly for the following two types of universities: 420 million yen (3.5 million US dollars) to 13 top A universities with the goal of entering the world's top 100 universities; 170 million yen (1.4 million US dollars) to 24 innovative B-class universities with the goal of leading the internationalization of Japanese education. The TGUP provided funding for A-class universities 2.5 times that of B-class universities, with a total budget of up to 96 billion Japanese yen.

TGUP no longer emphasizes EMI unilaterally, but instead prioritizes the comprehensive strength of universities and provides more comprehensive evaluation indicators [2]. Between 2013 and 2020, the educational internationalization in the 37 universities selected for TGUP in Japan achieved significant results: the EMI ratio increased from 7% to 17%, the proportion of EMI degrees increased from 18.9% to 28.9%, and the proportion of foreign teachers and teachers with overseas learning experiences increased from 18.9% to 28.9%. The policy goals had been basically achieved. However, the proportion of international students only increased from 8.8% to 14.6%, and the proportion of overseas students increased from 3.1% to 5.7%, far from the original target of 18.1% and 12.5%.

## **2.2. At the university level**

Since the 1990s, due to the declining birth rate, the number of enrollments in Japanese universities has continued to decline. The proportion of private universities in Japan in a shortage of students increased from 3.8% in 1996 to 45.8% in 2014 [4]. On one hand, to attract international students to solve the problem of student shortage and compete for limited financial support, Japanese universities should actively respond to the government's call to vigorously promote EMI courses. On the other hand, the proportion of international students and foreign teachers has become an important indicator for world university rankings, and Japanese universities are undoubtedly at a disadvantage in these indicators and have to step up their game. **Table 1** summarizes the achievements of the top 100 universities in Japan's QS rankings in recruiting international students in terms of the number of foreign professors and staff and EMI courses offered.

**Table 1.** The educational internationalization of Japanese Universities in the World’s Top 100 ranking in 2022 based on QS rankings <sup>[5]</sup>

Universities	QS Ranking	Ratio of international students	Ratio of foreign professors and staff	EMI courses
University of Tokyo	23	The number of international students was 4063, accounting for 14.6%; including undergraduates (12%) and graduates (88%). QS score = 27.8	317 persons, accounting for 7%. QS score = 10.4	2 undergraduate and 23 graduate degrees in EMI
Kyoto University	33	The number of international students was 2905, accounting for 12.9%; including undergraduates (7%) and graduates (93%) QS score = 22.1	348 persons, accounting for 9% QS score = 14.9	1 undergraduate and 15 graduate degrees in EMI
Tokyo Institute of Technology	56	The number of international students was 1720, accounting for 17.3%; including undergraduates (16%) and graduates (84%) QS score = 37.9	229 persons, accounting for 16%. QS score = 36.1	more than 90% of courses at the graduate level were EMI
Osaka University	75	The number of international students was 229, accounting for 10.1; including undergraduates (22%) and graduates (78%) QS score = 14.4	277 persons, accounting for 13%. QS score = 25	1 undergraduate and 12 graduate degrees in EMI
Tohoku University	82	The number of international students was 1928, accounting for 10.9%; including undergraduates (12%) and graduates (88%) QS score = 16.4	307 persons, accounting for 9% QS score = 14.1	3 undergraduate and 21 graduate degrees in EMI

### 3. Problems in the reform of EMI in Japan

#### 3.1. The lack of consideration for the English proficiency of teachers and students and the education system in Japan

Japan’s EMI reforms are driven by the government in a top-down approach. Initially, in the eyes of policymakers, higher education administrators, and university leaders, EMI almost became a “cure” that could solve all higher education problems. At that time, the administrators only focused on the positive effects of EMI courses and barely considered their educational value and potential negative effects. Undoubtedly, clear policy statements from the government can allow the effective implementation of EMI. In today’s view, developing EMI is the right choice for the Japanese government and is of great significance for the rapid development of higher education in Japan.

However, in the initial stage of EMI development, universities implemented government policies by simply increasing the number of EMI courses and mandatory EMI course fulfillment, which led to many problems. For example, professors who are not very proficient in English were forced to teach EMI courses without receiving any training. Besides, students who were not proficient in English were also required to participate in EMI courses without the necessary guidance or support. The nature of the curriculum was also completely disregarded as EMI was even incorporated into Japanese history and cultural courses. Both teachers and students had to put tremendous effort into the EMI courses, the course content had to be simplified, and there was almost no interaction between professors and students in the classroom.

The simple pursuit of EMI course numbers by Japanese universities is also closely related to the design of government evaluation indicators. Initially, the Japanese government scored the universities solely based on the EMI ratio, with higher ratios leading to higher scores, which induced universities to pursue a distorted goal on the number of EMI courses. After recognizing this problem, the Japanese government adjusted the EMI evaluation system. Japan’s evaluation indicator of TGUP was first changed to a maximum score of 50%

or above, and then to a maximum score of 35% or above. The change in this scoring standard, removing the institutional incentives, has led Japanese universities to attach importance to the quality, effectiveness, and implementation conditions of EMI courses.

### **3.2. Lack of corresponding support measures**

In Japan, the lack of support measures further increases the difficulty of EMI courses. Native EMI teachers complained that they did not receive any training and that there was a lack of evaluation standards and EMI teaching experience for reference, so they could only rely on their own exploration. Students participating in EMI courses complained that there was no other way to obtain learning assistance besides seeking help from the professors.

## **4. Conclusion**

In the process of educational internationalization and building world-class universities, although the efforts of Japanese universities cannot be ignored, the government has always played a significant role. The initial policy aimed to expand the enrollment of international students and directly provided financial support for EMI courses (such as the “Global 30 Project”), with relatively single policy goals and tools. The Japanese government quickly realized that simply pursuing an increase in the number of EMI does not necessarily enhance its attractiveness to international students. Therefore, the policy goals have evolved to enhance the global competitiveness of higher education and support world-class universities (such as the TGUP), and the policy priorities have shifted to employing international excellent professors and research experts and improving the teaching and research level of domestic universities.

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## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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