

# **Current topics in women's rights and equality within an English-medium university program for international cooperation**

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## **Abstract**

Gender-related topics are becoming increasingly popular in university courses in Japan, including those in English-medium content programs. This is at least in part due to the urgent need for gender equality in many areas of Japanese society such as political representation and labor rights protection. In this working paper, I introduce topics included in an interdisciplinary university program which prepares students for future careers in international cooperation. Students learn about various issues which are important for their future success in global contexts, and for this it is indispensable to discuss gender-related topics such as women's rights, LGBT issues, reproductive health, equal access to education, and more. Such innovative learning opportunities are a small but significant step forward for gender awareness and equality in Japan as well as for Japan's status in the international community. (This paper is written in preparation for the GALE Forum at the International JALT Conference 2016: Transformations in Gender Research and Learning.)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

There are several reasons why I am particularly interested in international cooperation and gender equality in the context of English-medium teaching. For the last several years, I have been teaching and conducting administrative work in an English program for international cooperation as an English language instructor at the International University of Japan, working closely with Meiji University and Rikkyo University to develop a collaborative academic program for undergraduate students. Among the various topics included in this program for international cooperation, gender equality is one of the most pressing and eye-opening themes being discussed. A large proportion of the students who opt to take courses in the program are female, which creates a classroom environment where students respond actively to gender-related topics in particular. Speculation of why female students tend to be more interested in internationally inclined courses is outside the scope of this paper, although it seems there are cultural factors which may have led to the lack of Japanese male students' interest in English language studies and studying abroad (Kato, 2009).

Issues in gender equality are also linked to current administrative decisions in our own universities. The Top Global University project, which is being carried out nationwide in 37 universities, calls for a more diverse faculty and staff represented equally by women and men (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2014). In 2014, when our university was collecting data to apply for the Top Global University project led by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), there were 43 full-time faculty members. At this time, only four of the 43 faculty members were female. Having been chosen to participate in the Top Global University project, the university is now taking proactive measures to increase the ratio of women faculty members. At the same time, staff members consisted of a higher percentage of female employees, but management positions were predominantly taken by male staff members. Thus, the university has been working toward increasing the percentage of women in management positions while maintaining the number of overall female staff. The gap between the seeming lack of awareness of gender issues in most Japanese workplaces and the goals set for the Top Global University project is intriguing, and how this imminent issue overlaps with the themes we discuss in our educational program for international cooperation strengthened my interest in the inclusion of gender-related topics in English-medium programs in Japan.

After an overview of the perceived notion of gender in Japanese society and university education, I will give examples of how gender equality and women's rights have been incorporated into the interdisciplinary university program for which I have been working over the last three years. Since this program uses English as the medium of instruction and focuses on international cooperation, which is an unprecedented area of focus for undergraduate students in Japan, documenting these

examples will be of interest, hopefully, to language educators within and outside of Japan as well as anyone interested in university-level curriculum development. I conclude with some comments about the significance of including gender-related topics in our curriculum and the connections these topics have with the desire for Japanese people to become more “global,” a popular notion in Japanese education today.

## **2. GENDER AWARENESS AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN JAPAN**

“Japan is a developed country. That’s why we came here to study,” an international student from a developing country in Asia said to me when I asked why they chose to come to Japan. This seems to be a common notion – Japan is a “developed” country. Mostly, this has to do with Japan’s exceptional economic success post-WWII. Other signs of Japan’s perceived “developed”-ness include how Japan has a developed transportation system, advanced technology, and a high literacy rate. In this way, Japan has earned an international reputation that competes with (so-called) Western countries.

Unfortunately, being categorized as “developed” doesn’t automatically mean that Japan meets international standards in all areas of society. According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2015 published by the World Economic Forum (2015), Japan’s score for gender equality is 0.67 (the highest possible score is 1, and the lowest, signifying inequality, is 0). This places Japan 101st out of 145 countries in the world. Based on this ranking, Japan is hardly an advanced society compared with the rest of the world. The most prominent areas in which Japan’s score is low are the representation of women in managerial positions (0.10) and political representation (0.10 for women in parliament, and 0 for head of state).

Historically, achieving gender equality in access to higher education was also an issue in Japan until around the 1990s, when more female high school graduates attended two-year junior colleges than four-year university programs. Since then, the ratio of students who attend four-universities has increased significantly, and the percentage of female students in particular has grown to the extent that it now exceeds the male percentage (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, Japan, 2016; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999) (See Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of male and female students attending four-year universities after completion of secondary education

	Male	Female
1995	26.5	18.7
2016	52.4	57.3

Equal access to university education has thus recently improved for female students in Japan. Opportunities for work, however, are still biased in favor of men. Although there has been some improvement in the past years, higher management positions in companies and organizations in Japan are still held predominantly by men (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2015). Women are often pressured to leave a full-time position if they become pregnant, and it is still unusual for men to take time off from work for childcare. The ratio of women politicians is also exceptionally low. Therefore, while Japan can be considered progressive in some ways such as equal access to education, overall, Japan is still not nearly as high on the scale of gender equality as other nations of comparable economic status.

University education is one way to help Japanese people become aware of such problems and issues. Some universities in Japan allow students to major in gender-related studies<sup>1</sup>. However, the numbers of academic programs where the main focus is gender or women's studies are few. It is more common for a Japanese university to have just a few courses offered by the humanities department, which students can take for optional credit, or for gender-related topics to be included in a more general sociology major. Courses on such topics may be taught in either Japanese or English.

Needless to say, opportunities to learn about gender-related issues are even fewer for those who do not enter university. Although Japan clearly needs to improve its social climate for accepting women as equal members of society, attempts to fill this gap are still in their rudimentary stages.

Over the last few years, I have had the chance to work in a university program that focuses on teaching students about international cooperation. In this program, students learn about how various social and environmental issues affect each other as we progress toward a more interconnected, global society. Topics related to gender and equality have been incorporated into several courses, some of which I discuss below. Collectively, the courses send a strong message about how becoming more aware of gender and human rights issues are crucial for the future of Japan as well as for the larger international community.

### **3. CASE STUDY: AN ENGLISH-MEDIUM PROGRAM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

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<sup>1</sup> Ochanomizu University, International Christian University, and Josai International University each have an undergraduate major and/or graduate program dedicated to gender-related studies.

### 3.1 Overview of the Human Resource Development Program for International Cooperation (HRIC)

The Human Resource Development Program for International Cooperation (HRIC) (Human Resource Development Program for International Cooperation, 2013) is a project supported by MEXT which aims to provide English-medium courses on international cooperation to undergraduate students at Meiji and Rikkyo Universities in Tokyo with the cooperation of the International University of Japan (located in Niigata prefecture). HRIC is unique in that students from any department belonging to the two universities (Meiji and Rikkyo) can freely take courses on campuses at the three universities (Meiji, Rikkyo, and IUJ) and learn together in the same class, and that the classes are about various topics related to international cooperation. In addition, the courses are held entirely in English. The main target of the program is Japanese students, as its long-term goal is to help students kick-start careers in international cooperation, thereby increasing the number of Japanese representatives in the United Nations and related international organizations in the world. At the same time, international students are welcome to join and are appreciated for contributing their perspectives.

HRIC differs from a typical English language and literature or comparative culture department in that it discusses issues mainly in developing countries and cases where human rights are violated in those countries, rather than focusing only on aspects of Western and Japanese societies. It is also slightly different from an international relations approach in that the focus is on finding solutions to problems affecting people at a global level rather than promoting the interests of particular nations. International cooperation is a relatively new focus of academic study, and most universities only offer courses in this field as part of a graduate program. In an

effort to fill this need, HRIC became the first program in Japan to offer such courses to undergraduate students in English. HRIC courses are positioned in a way that they are not required for students to graduate. Students who participate in HRIC are from all majors and choose to take courses as electives.

Courses in HRIC are based on various topics and formats. While there is a suggested sequence for taking the courses, students are able to take courses in any order, and they can take just one or as many as they would like (see Appendix for a program roadmap.) Students who complete 10 or more credits in the program and meet specified requirements receive a certificate of completion. There are lecture-style, seminar-style, and field trip-based courses. The lecture-style classes are larger in size (up to 60 students) and invite a different guest speaker from different backgrounds for each class (“Liberal Arts for Global Common” and “Introduction to Global Issues”). Seminar-style courses have a more focused area of study for the semester (“Solution Approach” courses). Field trip courses include either fieldwork overseas or in the Tokyo area, or a stay at the International University of Japan campus with international graduate students (“Active Research” courses and “International Cooperation Literacy”).

As the specially appointed instructor at the International University of Japan, I have been in a unique position to be able to observe all of the courses in the program. I have visited classes in most of the existing courses since April 2013, when HRIC officially started offering courses. The examples discussed below are based on my experiences teaching, observing, or assisting the classes, and talking with other instructors and guest lecturers.

3. 2 Introduction to Global Issues: Guest lectures in gender equality and human rights

Introduction to Global Issues is a lecture-style course which invites guest speakers for most of the weekly sessions throughout the semester. Although the format is similar to Liberal Arts for Global Common, another course with various guest speakers, the difference between them is that Introduction to Global Issues focuses more on problems affecting individuals and minority groups as a result of globalization, while Liberal Arts for Global Common approaches the same issues from the perspective of representatives of larger entities such as the United Nations and national governments.

Topics for both courses tend to vary from semester to semester due to the availability of guest speakers (many of whom have served in high-ranking positions in international organizations or NGOs) or what the instructors decide would be a timely topic. In Introduction to Global Issues (Spring 2013), there was a guest lecture by the LGBT Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch, a major international organization which advocates for human rights worldwide. The class discussed examples of LGBT human rights abuses around the world and the need to raise awareness toward these issues. There was another guest speaker from Gender Action Platform (Fall 2013) who gave a talk about gender equality. This class started with a basic introduction to what gender is and proceeded to establish links between gender equality and development, peace, and security.

These gender-related topics are included among other issues which currently affect us and others around the world, such as war and conflict, environmental destruction, and human rights violations. Each lecture by the guest speakers in Introduction to Global Issues emphasizes the need for increased awareness of problems that affect us directly or indirectly. In discussions which summarize the various issues dealt within the course, students make connections between all the



issues and comment on the complexity of each problem. In this context, gender-related issues are situated among other global issues and are part of an interconnected web of problems that need to be considered when thinking about peace, human rights, and sustainability of the planet.

### 3.3 Solution Approach D: Workshop on reproductive health led by an NGO representative

Solution Approach D is a seminar-style course that centers around a series of workshops led by guest speakers who are practitioners in a field related to international cooperation. The objective of the course is for students to understand a range of different types of organizations and systems for tackling global issues in contemporary society, and the invited guest speakers are from various professional backgrounds. When I observed this class in Summer 2014, one of the guest speaker sessions was on reproductive health – ensuring health and safety for pregnant women and advocating for family planning and women’s rights. This session, led by a representative of an NGO based in Japan, was conducted in a workshop format. Students used large sheets of paper to draw a picture of what they thought a pregnant woman looked like and brainstormed factors that might affect the life of this imagined person.

The hands-on approach to learning taken throughout Solution Approach D allows students to intuitively understand issues through discussions and activities. Students attending the course inevitably had to think about gender equality and women’s rights among other problem-solving tasks relevant to international cooperation.

### 3.4 International Cooperation Literacy: Student-led group presentations

International Cooperation Literacy is a summer-intensive course where International University of Japan hosts undergraduate students from Meiji and Rikkyo Universities so they can experience living and studying in an international, graduate school environment. Students attend lectures given by International University of Japan faculty members and work with international graduate students majoring in either international relations or international business to discuss and give team presentations on topics related to international cooperation. As with the other courses in HRIC, all classes are held entirely in English.

As the coordinator and main instructor for this course, I work closely with the students to have discussions and deliver presentations. Although we do not have a fixed class that focuses specifically on gender or women's rights, students choose their own topics to give presentations on during the course, and sometimes they would choose a gender-related topic. For example, one group of students (in Summer 2015) chose to give a presentation about the need to promote gender equality and question gender roles in society. They introduced this topic to other participating students and explained efforts taken by international organizations to promote gender equality around the world.

### 3. 5 Discussion: Gender-related topics in international cooperation

As with Introduction to Global Issues, lecture topics within all courses are subject to change each semester, and there are additional classes which focus on or mention gender-related issues besides the ones mentioned above. In all cases, the issues brought up throughout class discussions are ultimately presented as interconnected with each other, and gender is one of the recurring themes that come up when discussing the overall picture of global issues and world sustainability.

Overall, students learn about gender equality and women's rights as a major issue within the larger context of global issues in HRIC. While students who take the courses are limited to those who have the extra time and motivation, the program benefits from being inclusive of students from all majors in multiple universities. Collectively, HRIC courses encourage awareness of gender-related issues taking place within Japanese society as well as in developing countries. Gender inequality is a common problem in topics in international cooperation, and it is crucial to acknowledge this as part of our roles and responsibilities in international society.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

University students in Japan have access to opportunities to learn and talk about issues related to gender and equality for women, but traditional academic programs have been insufficient for improving the actual status of women in Japanese society. One new approach being taken, among others, is inclusion of gender-related issues into the international cooperation program introduced in this paper. While it is not imperative for the program to be in English to be effective, this has allowed many distinguished guest speakers, instructors, and students to take part in the program. As an added bonus, students benefit from acquiring English skills through meaningful input, which has proven to be a major attraction for students.<sup>2</sup>

It is also important to place this discussion about Japanese education in a global context. Learning about women's rights and equality and their violations around the world, including in less developed countries, gives students perspective on how these issues are relevant to Japan's role in the larger international society. If Japan really wants to be "Super Global" (the Japanese name for Top Global

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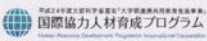
<sup>2</sup> Questionnaires given to students during Spring and Fall semesters in 2015 showed that approximately half of the respondents were interested in taking HRIC courses primarily in order to improve or maintain their English skills.

University Project is “Super Global University Project,” or [スーパーグローバル大学創成支援] in Japanese) as announced through the government projects being heavily invested into, such awareness building needs to be expanded and continued into the future. Slowly, people are becoming aware of the need to adapt their thinking to a more global perspective, and along with it, the need for women’s rights and equality in society. The transformation is not happening overnight, but like other global issues, we can only hope that people realize how to build and sustain a society with less inequality, less discrimination, and less human rights abuses in due time.

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# Appendix: Human Resource Development Program for International Cooperation Roadmap (taken from the HRIC official pamphlet 2015)



## Program Roadmap

The world is your stage!

### Program Structure

The HRIC program has two paths, the Motivation Path and the Career Path. Students who meet all of the requirements for each path will receive a certificate of achievement.

#### Motivation Path (9 courses offered in 2015)

Courses in the Motivation Path give an overview of the field of international cooperation. Through taking these courses, students acquire basic concepts in international cooperation and gain further motivation to explore topics in the Career Path.


#### Career Path (3 courses offered in 2015)

Courses in the Career Path provide students with more advanced concepts in international cooperation. In these courses, students have the opportunity to apply their learning to real life interactions and case studies in international settings. Completing the Career Path equips students with practical experience essential for beginning their professional career in areas related to international cooperation beyond graduation.


### System for the Human Resource Development Program for International Cooperation (2015)

	Level of specialization			
Career Path		<b>Becoming global leaders in international cooperation</b>		
		<b>Active Research 1</b> 4 credits		
		<b>Active Research 2</b> 2 credits		
	<b>International Cooperation Literacy</b> 2 credits			
			<b>Learning liberal arts for global common</b>	
			<b>Solution Approach A to G (7 themes)</b> 2 credits	
<b>Introduction to Global Issues</b> 2 credits				
<b>Liberal Arts for Global Common</b> 2 credits				
Motivation Path				
	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year

### Classes (Motivation Path courses)



Lectures by guest speakers with expertise in various areas of International Cooperation and development ("Liberal Arts for Global Common")



Model United Nations in session at "Solution Approach E (Experiential Learning through Model United Nations)"