

# Fostering Global Partnership at Tokushima University: The Vital Role of Academic Agreements

## グローバル連携に向けた徳島大学における学術交流協定の現状と展望

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**Abstract.** Universities in Japan are putting efforts into establishing international academic agreements, as they recognize the benefits that these partnerships can bring in terms of research, academic exchange, and cultural understanding. This paper aims to show the current situation of international academic exchange agreements at Tokushima University (TU) in the context of Japan's higher education. From the situation, breakdown, trends, and challenges of TU's international partnerships over the years, the authors show their perspectives on the vital importance of agreements as a keyway to collaborating, sharing resources, creating opportunities, promoting global understanding, and preparing students for a world where cross-cultural and international collaboration is becoming increasingly important.

Keywords: higher education institution, internationalization, Tokushima University, partnership, agreement

### Introduction

International Academic Exchange Agreements (hereafter, agreements) are an indispensable part of the internationalization of higher education (Gieser, 2018). These represent agreements between academic institutions, such as universities, colleges, or research centers, that establish a formal partnership or collaboration between the institutions. These agreements can take many forms, such as research collaborations, student exchange programs, joint degree programs, or faculty exchange programs. Academic agreements can have many benefits, such as fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange between institutions, providing opportunities for students and faculty to study and work at other institutions, and increasing the visibility and reputation of the institutions involved (Dusdal & Powell, 2021). They can also help to facilitate the transfer of technology and knowledge between institutions. International collaborations open opportunities for students to gain global exposure, and help them understand cross-culture differences; the difference in the education system enriches the quality of education. Partnerships and collaborations are very important for any HEI to gain reputation, rankings, and accreditations. Partnerships also help HEIs to achieve trust and maintain credibility. Partnerships help to increase the KPIs on International outlook (staff, students, research, which contribute to international ranking (THE, 2022).

However, establishing and maintaining an academic agreement may require significant resources, including financial, human, and technical resources. Also, it's important to have a clear vision and goals for the partnership and to have open communication and coordination channels between the institutions.

The history of academic agreements in Japan can be traced back to the late 19th century when Japan began to establish relationships with Western countries in the fields of education and research. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan sent students and scholars abroad to Western countries and began to establish academic relationships with Europe and the US. After World War II, Japan's international academic relations became more widespread. In the 1950s and 1960s, Japanese universities and research institutions began to establish academic agreements with institutions in other countries, particularly in the US, Europe, and Asia. These agreements primarily focused on student and faculty exchange as well as joint research projects. In the 1970s and 1980s, Japan's international academic relations continued to expand. The government also began to provide funding for international academic exchange programs, which helped to support these relationships (IFIC-JICA, 2004). In the 21st century, Japan has continued to prioritize internationalization in higher education and research, with many Japanese institutions establishing academic agreements with institutions around the world. Japan's Ministry of

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has also implemented policies to promote international collaboration and exchange, such as the Top Global University Project, which aims to increase the number of world-class universities in Japan (Ota, 2018). Overall, the history of agreements in Japan has been marked by steady growth in the number and scope, as Japan has sought to promote internationalization and collaboration in higher education and research. Japanese universities and research institutions have established agreements with institutions around the world, in fields such as science, engineering, medicine, and the humanities.

Today's HEIs in Japan, more or less, maintain partnerships in the form of international academic exchange agreements with overseas universities or institutions (Ota, 2018). One of the main ways that Japanese institutions establish academic agreements is through academic exchange programs, such as student and faculty exchange programs. Japanese institutions have also established joint degree programs with foreign institutions abroad, or established research collaborations with institutions in foreign countries, allowing researchers to work together on projects and share resources. We can see the increasing trend in the number of overseas agreements in the "Survey results on inter-university exchange agreements with overseas universities and overseas bases" conducted by the MEXT every year, regardless of the form of national, public, or private research and educational institutions (Table 1). The number of agreements is increasing every year, indicating a trend of further expansion and development. Most of Japan's universities have a strong international partnership network. In the case of Tokyo University, it has 360 active partners on the list (Tokyo University, 2022). Agreements seem to play an important role in promoting internationalization and collaboration in higher education in Japan. While there are challenges to establishing and maintaining these agreements, the benefits of international collaboration can be significant. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many academic agreements have been affected in recent years, as travel and in-person meetings have been limited. This has led to a shift towards virtual collaboration and remote learning, which can have its own set of challenges and limitations. However, except for a few reports found on the internet (Baek, 2021), little is known about the actual status or situation of the implementation of these agreements.

Table 1. Number of agreements between 2013 and 2020 (MEXT, 2022)

	<i>National</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Total</i>
2013	9,515	1,273	11,582	22,370
2014	10,517	1,461	12,814	24,792

2015	14,738	1,842	15,349	31,929
2016	17,970	1,994	18,300	38,264
2017	19,837	2,261	19,528	41,626
2018	20,867	2,368	21,579	44,814
2019	22,176	2,675	23,103	47,954
2020	23,025	2,804	24,068	49,897

For Tokushima University (TU), a national university with a strong focus on science and engineering, academic agreements with overseas institutions are playing a very important role in promoting joint research and publications. In this context of growing interest in collaboration with overseas universities and institutions, this paper presents the status of international academic exchange agreements of TU. The purpose is to identify challenges to future international academic exchange for the globalization of education and research activities in Japan and sustainable international cooperation and to discuss the policies and the outlook for the implementation of agreements. The opinion expressed in this paper does not represent the TU's view.

## The Situation of the Agreements of TU

### *Distribution of agreements by continents/regions*

TU has concluded agreements with 99 universities and institutions in 30 countries and regions as of May 1, 2022, as shown in Figure 1 (TU, 2022). Compared to merely 31 agreements in 2003 (MEXT, 2003), the current number of agreements marks a significant increase.



Figure 1. Distribution of agreements (TU, 2022)

As shown in Figure 2, international partners of TU which come from Asia, consist of about two third of the total, the majority of which are with China, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, and India. Next comes agreements with institutions in Europe. On the other hand, there are relatively few agreements in the Americas, Oceania, Africa, and Middle East regions. There are currently no agreements with universities and

institutions in the surrounding Russian and Arabic countries.

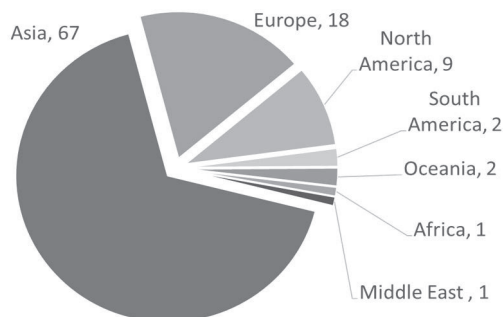


Figure 2. Number of agreements (TU, 2022)

### Agreements by type

There are several types of academic exchange documents that are commonly used to facilitate academic exchange between universities, such as Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Exchange Agreements, Student Exchange Agreements, Joint Degree Agreements, Research Collaboration Agreements, Dual Degree Agreements, Internship Agreements, etc. They could be legally bound or not bound, and the content of each type also varies case by case.

At TU, agreements can be broadly divided into university-wide agreements signed by the presidents of the HEIs, and department-level agreements signed by the heads of faculties or departments. TU has concluded 44 university-wide agreements and 55 department-level agreements with foreign HEIs as of May 1, 2022 (TU, 2022).

Regarding the content, basically, the agreement sets the fundamental principles of academic cooperation and exchange in general, including faculty exchange, student exchange, joint research and development, holding academic conferences, and exchanging academic materials, publications, and information. Most often, the general agreement is paired with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that sets out detailed terms and conditions for student exchange under the general agreement. Sometimes, there is no MOU, but in this case, although it is possible for one-off student exchanges based on the agreement of both institutions, related conditions such as tuition fee exemption and credit transfer are not fixed, which makes long-term exchange programs difficult. Table 2 shows the number of agreements of TU by type and status of MOU for student exchange.

Table 2. Agreements by type (TU, 2022)

	Student	No
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Type	Exchange MOU	MOU	Total
University-wide	40	15	55
Department-level	31	13	44
Total	71	28	99

On the other hand, agreements with foreign research institutes or Japanese language schools could be written in the form of Agreements on Cooperation, which may consist of terms about researcher exchanges, joint research, holding research meetings, sharing research information, or holding student recruitment events, sending and accepting students and providing scholarships, etc.

### Agreements by language and culture sphere

TU has agreements with institutions in 30 language-cultural areas. Considering the short-term overseas training and long-term study abroad that are conducted to deepen the understanding of foreign languages and different cultures, as well as improve specialized knowledge in the fields of science and technology of students, it is important to understand the language-cultural area of the partner institutions. The diversity provided by these language-cultural areas is important for fostering students' international sensibility and foreign language ability. In principle, the agreement is to be written in English to prevent disputes due to inconsistent interpretations of the agreement after signing. However, TU keeps a Japanese version accordingly.

### Duration of Agreement

Among the current agreements, the oldest one was signed in 1986, while the last one was signed in 2022. The average life of the TU's current agreements is 10.6 years. The agreements of TU are usually valid for 5 years, and 3 years, and could be automatically renewable. In some cases, due to inactivity, lack of a coordinator, changing the management structure, or some other conditions, the agreements are terminated without renewal. However, if necessary, it is possible to amend the agreement mutually in writing.

### Exchange performance

Knowing about the actual status of agreement implementation on a regular basis is a very important step for promoting international exchanges of TU. After signing an agreement, it is important to monitor the progress of exchanges.

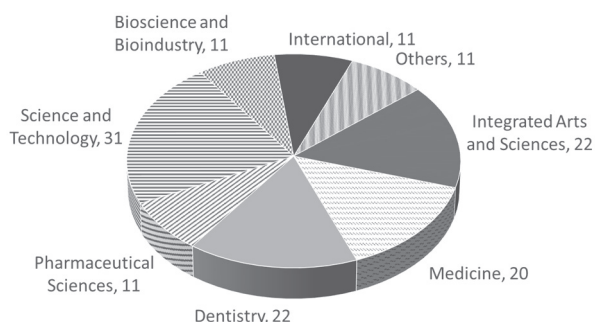


Figure 3. Coordinators of agreements (TU, 2022)

At TU, the responsibility for reporting the implementation of the agreements is shared by the coordinating faculties and departments (Figure 3). According to the latest record, during the period April ~ to September 2022, only 35.4% of agreements have some kind of exchange activities with overseas partners in the form of student exchange, faculty exchange, online event, etc., while the left of the agreements has no report of activities. Among the agreements that showed inactivity during the concerned period, we did not find any statistical association with the type and region of the institution, as well as duration and type of agreement.

#### *Regulations regarding agreements*

At TU, agreements with overseas institutions are concluded and renewed based on the decisions of the Tokushima University International Exchange Committee. There are procedures for inter-university agreements and inter-departmental agreements, the roles of the coordinator in charge of exchanges with a partner, and regular reports on exchange results, etc., which are necessary for concluding and renewing agreements. The rules concerning international agreements, in general, are available on the university webpage.

## **Discussion**

#### *Quality versus quantity*

Increasing the number of agreements is the goal that most of the universities have focused on during the process of internationalization because it is a visible indicator and evaluation, while it is much more difficult to monitor and assess the quality of agreement implementation. Together with the increased number of agreements, there will be issues of follow-up, coordination, reporting, and evaluation of activities which will be difficult to maintain when the number of agreements gets higher. So far, it lacks studies on the most adequate number of agreements for a university to maintain, probably because it could depend on many

factors. Which country and which university or research institute to conclude an agreement with or maintain an agreement with can vary greatly depending on what kind of strategy each university desires for an agreement. In terms of quantity, TU has comparatively a fair number of agreements compared to universities of similar size. For comparison, Osaka University, a much larger and one of the top-tier universities in Japan, has 140 university-wide agreements (Osaka University, 2021), while Tottori University, a national university of similar scale to TU, has 77 university-wide agreements (Tottori University, 2021). With several agreements close to 100, TU has achieved the aim of building an international network for education and research with overseas institutions and may need to pay attention to the quality of international academic exchange through agreements, while maintaining the number of agreements. To that end, collaboration is based on an international exchange strategy that reflects the intentions of stakeholders including universities, departments, centers, research units, faculty, staff, researchers, and students. In other words, it is expected that a formal agreement will be transformed into a strategic agreement with substantial content desired by the exchange parties. However, in practice, it seems difficult to expand the implementation of agreements beyond the scope of the original design because it may need more information sharing and agreement promotion activities among stakeholders.

#### *Short-term study abroad programs*

Agreements play an important role in sending students abroad. At TU, the demand for students who want to improve their English proficiency is always increasing. In fact, many TU students are enrolled in short-term programs in a native-speaking country (TU International Office, 2021), while few seemed to be interested in a short-term programs in other language-cultural regions. This is in line with the fact that one of the priorities of internationalization of higher education is to educate the “global human resources” with good English proficiency and cultural diversity awareness who could competitively work and resolve the problem on the global stage (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2017) and students are aware of the importance to become such a human resource (Tran, 2018). Although only 11 agreements are with institutions in English-speaking areas in North America and Oceania, these agreements are very important for sending students short-term to the English language and cultural areas, and TU may need to consider increasing the number of partners in English-speaking regions. At the same time, within the other agreements in the non-English-speaking region, English as a medium of instruction (EMI) programs could be offered as alternatives. Taking the fact that more than two third of the agreements of TU are with



institutions in Asia, it may need to consider expanding agreements with institutions in other linguistic and cultural spheres, such as Spanish, French, Arabic, African, or Russian language and cultural spheres. It is essential for realizing the diversification of destinations for the students.

#### *Accepting international students*

Having international students from various countries will undoubtedly be a stimulus for Japanese students to improve their international sensibilities and foreign language skills (Kamiya & Nakagawa, 2007). Agreements play an important role in accepting international students, including regular, non-regular, and research students. At TU, where the percentage of international students is at about 2%~3%, relatively low compared to top-tier universities such as Osaka University at 10%, international students accepted directly or indirectly via agreements consist of a significant portion of the international body. Figure 4 shows the proportion of international students at TU as of May 2022.

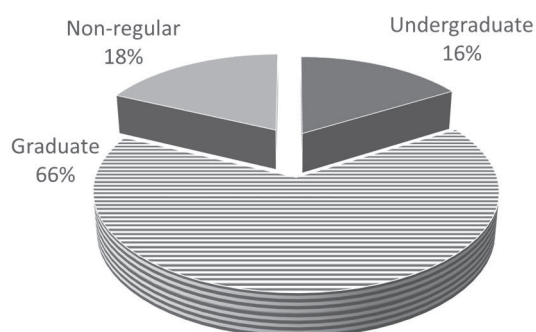


Figure 4. Types of international students (TU, 2022)

Most undergraduate students are accepted via the pre-arrival admission system with foreign Japanese language schools in Asia. The availability of master's and doctoral degree courses in English is also an important factor that contributes to the high proportion of graduate students recommended by partners, as it allows for recruiting excellent international students regardless of their Japanese language proficiency. A significant portion of graduate students is accepted via recommendation from agreement partners. The high number of agreements with partners in Asia likely contributed to the large number of regular students enrolled. On the other hand, agreements with European and North American regions such as Sweden, Finland, and Canada are more likely to contribute to the number of exchange students enrolled. Although some students can attend classes in Japanese, in more cases accepting exchange students requires TU to offer classes in English. To attract more exchange students via agreements, it may need to provide more information and design more EMI courses for partner universities.

#### *COVID-19 influence and online transformation*

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, international student exchange and mobility have been constrained. In this situation, agreements play a very useful role in setting up exchange online programs. It is important to be able to respond flexibly and aim for sustainable international exchanges in the event of an unexpected disaster such as the novel coronavirus. Many HEIs in Japan piloted successfully online study abroad programs with their partners (Matsuda, 2022; Nakaya, 2022), usually based on some existing programs provided by foreign partners. At TU, starting in the summer of 2020, online study abroad programs were also in place, and it became clear that there was a certain effect from the perspective of global human resource development, and has the potential to continue after the COVID-19 pandemic (Kiyofuji et al., 2021; Kiyofuji & Hashimoto, 2021). There are also successful attempts to conduct online exchange activities with foreign partners, such as the introduction of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an online international exchange platform. Although designing such a program may need to consider many factors such as time difference, curriculum adjustment, language proficiency, etc., there are many reports proven their effectiveness and advantages as a result of stable agreement cooperation (Jun & Miyamoto, 2019; Nanba, 2022). The online exchange activities conducted at TU seemed to be promising but it may need to put more effort to ensure the sustainability of online international exchange with partners in the post-COVID era.

#### *Regulations, reporting, and risk management*

Generally, HEIs can have data on the number of student exchanges during a certain period based on the data recorded at International Division, so it is possible to accurately grasp the results of student exchanges. Some HEI reports having difficulty in collecting specific data on research exchanges conducted by faculty members and researchers, which are sometimes not recorded regularly (Baek, 2021). It seems to be necessary to build a system that can properly report on the achievements of research exchanges without increasing the work burden of each faculty and staff. At TU, there is a reporting system recently introduced to collect agreement implementation results, however, no details information could be collected yet. An international agreement varies widely from university to university, but it should be planned and implemented according to the university's strategies on a long-term basis. It is essential to have understanding and information sharing among stakeholders and departments involved.

In the current practices, agreements in Japan are often not bound and structured to promote exchanges with very few restrictions, and TU is no exception. As such, measures against intellectual property rights, data privacy, compensation for damages, applicable law, accidents, troubles, disputes, etc. are often not clearly specified. To mitigate these risks, it is important for universities to have clear agreements in place that take into account the legal and regulatory differences, and to have a plan in place for addressing any cultural or language barriers that may arise. It is also important to be aware of and to have a plan in place for dealing with unexpected events. There will be a shift to more binding agreements, and it is necessary to create a system that allows the drafting of agreements involving legal experts to anticipate the risks and solutions.

#### *Challenges in establishing and continuing agreements*

From the experiences of Japan's universities, including TU, some challenges can arise when establishing a new academic partnership. Finding a foreign university that aligns with the research interests and academic goals of a Japanese university can be difficult. Both Japan's universities and foreign universities may have different academic systems and cultures, which can make it difficult to establish a new academic agreement. Japan is located in a different time zone than many foreign countries, which can make it difficult to schedule meetings and communicate effectively. Establishing a new agreement involves navigating bureaucratic processes, such as obtaining approval from both universities, which can be time-consuming. It requires negotiation and agreement on various aspects such as the scope of the agreement, funding, and responsibilities of each party. Sometimes, it needs to organize multiple courtesy visits and signing ceremonies. Limited resources and budget constraints can make it difficult to establish a new academic agreement. Besides the above, there are challenges raised during the implementation of agreements and often cause discontinuation of agreements. In practice, sometimes a partnership violates the principle of equivalence of reciprocal benefits realized (Yarmoshuk et al., 2020). On the top is the communication breakdown due to language, time zone, or changes in leadership or personnel at either university, which can lead to a loss of continuity in the agreement and require renegotiation. Foreign students and researchers may encounter visa and immigration issues when coming to Japan, which can make it difficult for them to participate in academic exchange programs and research collaborations. Limited student and faculty interest in participating in academic exchange programs and research collaborations can make it difficult to maintain the academic agreement. To overcome these challenges, it is important to establish

clear communication channels and to regularly check in on the progress. Both universities should also work together to overcome cultural and academic differences and should be flexible to renegotiation in the event of personnel changes. Furthermore, it is essential to promote the agreement and to encourage student and faculty participation in the exchange. Finally, both universities should be aware of the budget constraints and work together to minimize the impact on the agreement.

#### *The future vision of agreements*

Agreements are likely to continue to play an important role in higher education in the future. With the increasing interconnectedness of the world and the growing importance of cross-cultural and international collaboration, academic agreements will become even more valuable in preparing students for a globalized workforce. The future of academic agreements will also be influenced by technological advancements, such as the increasing use of online learning and virtual exchange programs, which will make it easier for institutions to collaborate and share resources. This will enable institutions to reach a wider audience and will make it more feasible for students to study or work abroad, regardless of their physical location. For TU, academic agreements will continue to be a vital tool for higher education institutions to prepare students for a globalized world and to foster cross-cultural understanding and international collaboration.

#### **Conclusion**

Japan's higher education system faces several challenges including maintaining international competitiveness compared to other advanced countries in terms of quality of education and research and adapting to domestic and international markets as Japan's education is often geared towards the domestic market and may not produce graduates who are competitive in the international job market (Yonezawa, 2020). To address these challenges, international academic agreements play a very important role in the improvement of international competitiveness. Efforts are needed to establish new agreements while maximizing the impacts of existing partnerships.

In this paper, the authors describe their perspectives on the situation of international academic exchange agreements at TU in the broad context of the internationalization of Japan's higher education, COVID-19, and the world's transformations. The authors also specify the challenges and vision of international academic exchange in the future.

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