The irony of globalization: The experience of Japanese women in British higher education

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Abstract. Informal interviews and ethnographic research are used to identify the motivations of Japanese women to study in Britain, and to examine their experience as students as well as peripheral members of the labor force. It is found that Japanese women’s motivations to come to Britain to study are encouraged by the forces of globalization, including economic, cultural and intellectual factors. Women are also pushed to study abroad by domestic factors, as although Japan has developed an egalitarian education system for both sexes, women still encounter conservative social norms which constrain their lives and limit their job prospects. Japanese women’s experiences of higher education in Britain are mixed. Some women feel that their presence is merely tolerated and that they are not encouraged in their academic endeavours. Others find British higher education gives them the opportunity to develop their critical faculties and to become integrated into the life of the institution. These mixed responses are indicative of the contradictory consequences of globalization in education. Globalization has helped to give new educational opportunities to Japanese women. However, it has also created an international recruitment market in which some higher education institutions view students in financial terms and not as members of a scholarly community. One of the ironies of globalization, therefore, is that the mutual educational advantages of cross cultural contact are undermined by a reductive, narrowly economic view of foreign students as a source of revenue.

Keywords: British higher education, fees, globalization, immigration, Japanese women, overseas students

Introduction

One aspect of globalization is the increasing number of foreign students studying at higher education institutions in the UK, including female students from Japan. The rise in the number of international students has been encouraged by the recruitment efforts of British higher education institutions, much of which has focused on Japan and other far Eastern states. This recruitment drive has coincided with the internationalization of education in Japan, with an increasing number of academic exchanges, and more students, both men and women, venturing abroad (Kitamura 1997, p. 146).

The experiences of Japanese women studying in Britain can be analyzed in the context of the uneven development of globalization. The overlapping
processes that make up globalization have meant that some female students and ex-students find themselves in a contradictory position in both Japan and Britain. In Japan the partial movement towards equal opportunities has increased women’s educational options, including the chance to study abroad. This, however, has not been matched by improved job prospects for women, with long term careers remaining largely the prerogative of men. When female Japanese students arrive in Britain, they may find a gap between the broad social and educational aspirations on the one hand and their narrowly designated status as fee-paying ‘aliens’ on the other.

To understand the problematic position of some female Japanese students, one must analyze at least three different motivational factors that have prompted the increase in international contacts in higher education.

(1) The first motivation to engage in globalization in higher education is commercialism. This motivation is associated with the widespread acceptance of market values and imperatives in academia. The world is seen as a marketplace in which academic institutions compete for students as a source of revenue. Students are viewed as customers, or as economic units, and are not deemed to be part of the university community. In fact, the very concept of an academic community is irrelevant to this vision of globalization, as the university is modelled on a business enterprise in which staff provide a service for fee paying customers. This commercial form of globalization in higher education has had a considerable effect in Britain. It accords with government policy since the early 1980s and has an affinity with the shift towards managerialism amongst university administrators. However, female Japanese students that I interviewed explained that they were motivated to participate in the globalization of higher education for different reasons. They did not see their contribution to British academic institutions in terms of the fees they pay, but rather hoped for shared participation in intellectual and cultural exchanges. These aspirations on the part of female Japanese students are indicative of two further motivations to globalize higher education.

(2) Globalization holds out the promise of enhancing the free exchange of ideas by creating communities of scholars that cross national boundaries. In this sense, Masuda (1996) calls for ‘information literacy’ which stimulates dialogue in both East and West for a stable and sustainable global development. This second vision of globalization might be called the enlightenment idea. Although rooted in European thought, the idea that the desire for the unimpeded pursuit of knowledge that can unite people of different backgrounds emerges as an aspiration in Japan after the Meiji restoration.

(3) A third motivation to globalize higher education is to encompass diversity. This vision of globalization is associated with the aim of ‘inter-