

Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Comparing Policy Ideas across Institutions and Disciplines at Japanese Universities

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Introduction

My current research is a qualitative study of policy ideas and programs aimed at fostering regional cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea in the higher education sector. While sharing rich and interconnected cultural histories spanning millennia, the three countries have experienced a range of political and diplomatic tensions in the more recent past. Efforts have been made in the last several decades, however, to promote forms of regional cooperation across a variety of sectors in the political, economic and socio-cultural arenas (TCS 2017). The aims of this research project are to understand the ideas shaping Northeast Asian regional cooperation in the higher education (HE) sector from the perspective of Japan, and to investigate the ways policy ideas are translated into practice across different institutional and disciplinary contexts in Japanese universities. This takes in an investigation of the conditions under which those ideas are implemented and any limits, barriers and resistances to them.

The research takes the form of an interpretive study underpinned by a social constructivist epistemology. Adopting a discursive institutionalist approach (see Schmidt 2008, 2010) the study aims to investigate the ways cognitive and normative ideas about HE regional cooperation (and not others) emerge and become institutionalized, as well as how they are contested, re-appropriated and translated by actors into practice. To investigate these issues, two government-initiated regional collaboration programs have been selected, one representing higher education's societal role as a producer of research-based knowledge, and the other representing its social function as a site for teaching and

learning. The program addressing the former role is the A3 Foresight program, a funding scheme for scientists to engage in regional research collaboration. The program addressing the latter role is CAMPUS Asia, a regional exchange program for students at top universities in the three countries. Through contextualized case studies involving thematic analysis of documents and over 60 semi-structured interviews with program participants, an attempt is being made to construct nuanced and informed answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the ideas shaping Northeast Asian regional cooperation in the higher education sector at Japanese universities? How do these ideas compare across institutional and disciplinary contexts? How do they compare with policy ideas at the government level?
2. What factors can account for the emergence of these ideas (as opposed to others)?
3. Under what conditions and how are these ideas translated into practice across different institutions and disciplines? What facilitates the translation into practice and are there limits, barriers or resistances?

Literature Review

In addition to Northeast Asia, similar efforts at forming higher education regions have been identified around the world. The most notable example is the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and its program for regional mobility ERASMUS+, but other initiatives have emerged in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia (Chou and Ravinet 2017). According to Chou and Ravinet (2017), this emerging phenomenon

of higher education regionalism is one of several manifestations of higher education policy-making taking place in complex multi-level settings that have been relatively unexamined in academia. Some studies of CAMPUS Asia have been undertaken (Breaden 2018; Kyung 2015) and regionalization of East Asian higher education has been addressed in the literature (Byun and Um 2014; Kuroda 2009, 2016b; Kuroda, Yuki, and Kang 2010). While much of this work has provided valuable insights, the research proposed in this study will aim to address gaps in the literature by contributing an in-depth, nuanced picture of HE regionalism from the perspective of Japan through the application of theories and concepts from International Relations described above (Schmidt 2008, 2010).

In this respect the study will aim to contribute new and valuable knowledge to the social science literature by bridging the fields of Higher Education Studies, International Relations and the interdisciplinary field of Comparative Regionalism. It is hoped the knowledge generated will also have societal relevance by highlighting the potential value of HE regional collaboration programs in fostering peaceful and cooperative relations between China, Japan, and South Korea.

Case Selection

The two 'top-down' government-initiated programs for HE regionalism selected for this study are the A3 Foresight Program and CAMPUS Asia. These programs are briefly described below.

The CAMPUS Asia Program

CAMPUS Asia is a program for educational exchange among students at top universities in China, Japan and South Korea, and is funded by the governments of the three countries. According to the National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD), the aim of CAMPUS Asia is to promote "exchange and cooperation with quality assurance among universities in Japan, China and Korea, in order to strengthen the competitiveness of universities and nurture the next generation of outstanding talent in Asia" (NAID n.d.). The idea for the program can be traced to the second Japan-China-Korea Trilateral Summit held in October 2009, when then Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama was

advancing his vision of creating an East Asian Community. The first pilot version of the program was launched in 2011. At the time of this writing the program is now in its second phase and has expanded so that 17 Japanese universities are participating with counterparts in China and Korea. Programs at each university are situated in different disciplines including architecture, medicine, law, art, business and policy studies, while others are interdisciplinary and open to students university-wide. Efforts are now being made at various levels to expand the program to ASEAN countries.

The A3 Foresight Program

A3 Foresight is a funding scheme for collaborative research run jointly between the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF). The program aims "to create world-class research hubs within the Asian region, which by advancing world-class research will contribute to the solution of common regional problems, while fostering new generations of talented young researchers" (JSPS 2015). Since 2005, a number of projects have been funded for five-year intervals in a range of scientific fields, including chemistry, biology, physics and engineering. As of this writing, 16 projects are considered to be 'completed', and 10 projects are currently underway.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis involves thematic analysis of documents and semi-structured interviews with government officials, program administrators, senior leadership, researchers and academics involved in program planning and implementation. Where possible students are also being interviewed who have either graduated from or are current participants in one of the two programs. To date, approximately 60 interviews have been conducted with a range of actors, and a wealth of documentary data has been collected in Japanese and English. The project is now in the data analysis stage. Analysis and interpretation of the data involves thematic coding of interview transcripts and documents using both inductive and deductive methods,

including the application of an analytic framework informed by discursive institutionalist theory (Schmidt 2008; 2010). Additionally, comparative analysis across institutions, programs, disciplines and individual actors is being conducted. The themes and comparisons are made using a grounded approach that attempts to acknowledge the biases and role of the researcher in the co-construction of the findings. Emergent themes will be combined with interpretations of participant narratives in an attempt to address the research questions. While some preliminary findings have begun to emerge, it is as yet unclear if there will be points of convergence across institutions, disciplines and actors indicative of a common set of ideas of regional cooperation in Northeast Asia from the perspective of Japan, or whether institutional, disciplinary, or individual-level factors will highlight the contrasts and unique characteristics of these varied contexts.

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