

Interview with Akihiro Ozawa, Route H's Director, Benesse Corporation

The Best & Brightest Youth in Japan Now Choose to Study Abroad

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

We often hear that young Japanese people do not like to go abroad but would rather spend their whole life in Japan. Even after graduating from schools and starting to work for a company, they would prefer to work in Japan and not overseas. Under globalization, companies need more employees eager to work outside Japan to expand their business, but young employees' preference seems to be exactly the opposite. Spending four years at a university abroad would not appear to be an option at all if an insular mentality is predominant among the youth of Japan. Such inward-lookingness is often cited as a cause of Japan's isolation in a globalized business community.

However, our story of Benesse Corporation, a Japanese education and caregiving service company, reveals that the best and brightest Japanese youth are today starting to search for the best overseas universities where they can study for at least four years.

Route H was developed to help such high-school students gain entry to elite universities abroad. We interviewed Akihiro Ozawa, Route H's director of the Global Learning Section in the Global Education Development Department of Benesse Corporation.

(Interviewed on Dec. 7, 2017)

Introduction

JS: First, could you please explain to us briefly what Benesse Corporation is doing?

Ozawa: The word Benesse derives from the Latin words for "well" and "being" —so essentially means "live well". Thus we aim at supporting people in mitigating their concerns in any life stage. We provide young expecting mothers with information about giving birth and raising a baby through our magazines. For students from elementary school to high school, we provide convenient tools for learning through a correspondence course in accordance with the Japanese Education Ministry's instructions for standard education. For working adults, we provide a foreign language education service at a language school. We also provide daycare facilities and caregiving facilities. The company was founded in 1955 as Fukutake Bookstore. In the 1960s, we started an operation of practice exams and expanded the business to correspondence course education in the 1970s, and in 1995 we changed the name of our company to Benesse Corporation.



Akihiro Ozawa, Route H's Director, Benesse Corporation (at the Route H-Harvard Kennedy School Japan Trek interaction)

Today we have the structure of a holding company and our correspondence course business has expanded to other Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan.

JS: Have your expanded correspondence courses in China been aimed at Japanese children living there?

Ozawa: No. We are providing our service for Chinese children in the Chinese language. Our overseas business has been

making progress in China, South Korea and Taiwan and we are now planning to expand it to Indonesia. Our membership in China has already exceeded one million.

We are engaged in managing preparatory schools in addition to correspondence courses. Our "Route H" operation was developed as one of those preparatory schools, but somewhat distinguished from the others since it specializes in helping students interested in studying abroad at the top-level universities outside Japan. Thus we named it "Route H" meaning "Route to Harvard University", one of the best universities in the United States.

JS: Could you explain how you got involved in Route H?

Ozawa: Route H was founded in 2008. I was working in our headquarters in Okayama then and was partly involved in this project. Right after its foundation I was transferred to the Tokyo office and put in charge of this. Our foreign instructors are in charge of lectures, while I am responsible for management of the school, administration for class organization and guidance for choosing the universities. I am also often involved in organizing events on studying abroad. These are organized several times a year to inform students about university exams overseas as well as the curricula at various universities. We are also trusted with the organization and management of a “school for studying abroad” in Kumamoto Prefecture’s education program. We have been successful in having some students from this school study abroad. Last year, one of the students got accepted to Harvard and MIT.

The school for Route H is a small-scale one and we have only one school with 15 students in Tokyo, two or three of whom participate online from a regional area or from abroad.

Preparing to Enter a School Overseas

JS: Young Japanese people in general are today inward-looking, I suppose. They would not like to go overseas, even if they were told to do so. What do you think of this trend?

Ozawa: I think there must be a variety of young people. While there are some inward-looking people, there are others who are eager to study abroad. The students in the second group may have several incentives to do so. First, they may find it easier to go to a university abroad if their parents used to work outside Japan and they were brought up in an international environment. Secondly, they may want to make a contribution to global society in the future, and thirdly they may sense a risk of the Japanese losing out in international competition with their neighbors like the Chinese and Koreans, who increasingly study abroad these days.

If either those students or their parents are interested in studying abroad, they can collect information by attending our events about overseas universities. Though they are in the minority at their schools, they would easily make friends among the people attending our events, since they share a common interest. They would quickly create a network among such students interested in going abroad.

JS: As Japanese companies are today increasingly



moving their business facilities overseas, I guess the number of children brought up overseas and coming back to Japan after spending some years at schools abroad will increase significantly.

Ozawa: Yes. It may be the case, since more than half of the 67 graduates from the Route H program are students who had stayed overseas in their childhood. On the other hand, a little less than half of those graduates were brought up solely in Japan. A college application for a university overseas is a total assessment of a student’s capacity and whether the student has been brought up outside Japan should not affect the outcome of the exam.

JS: Thinking about the best universities outside Japan, we would think of the US or European universities, but recently the number of good universities in Asia is increasing as well. Have any of your graduates from Route H studied abroad at an Asian university?

Ozawa: Yes. One went to Yale-NUS College in Singapore and some went to New York University Abu Dhabi School in the United Arab Emirates. They can enjoy the merits of Asian universities in collaboration with US universities. New York University Abu Dhabi School is a beneficiary of plentiful funding and equipped with a good learning environment. American professors come to these two schools from the US to teach and thus the students can have an

American education in Asia. That would be a notable merit for students interested in working in Asia in the future.

JS: The quality and status of the Asian universities are rising, while those of Japanese universities are deteriorating. The best universities in Asia, such as Tsinghua University or Peking University in China and the Indian Institute of Technology as well as the National University of Singapore or Australian National University, have been attracting growing attention to their high-quality education. Will there be many Japanese students aiming to study at universities in non-English speaking nations like China?

Ozawa: Almost all of our Route H program graduates studied in the US. However, Tsinghua University in China, for example, is listed as No. 1 for engineering among global universities, according to the most recent rankings by US News & World Report. They are now collaborating with MIT in working on practical research and could be popular among our students in the future. There are some students in the Route H program, though not so many yet, who have Japanese nationality but either Chinese parents or grandparents. They could become the frontrunners in studying at Chinese universities.

JS: We often hear that the number of Japanese students at overseas graduate schools is today significantly decreasing. Once there were lots of Japanese graduate students at Harvard or other universities, but today there are very few Japanese and many Chinese and Korean students. Do you think this situation will change hereafter?

Ozawa: As you know, most of the Japanese students studying at overseas graduate schools then were sent by a company paying for their school expenses. Due to the worsened Japanese economic situation, such students have declined drastically. But in our social meetings with Harvard graduate school students, we found some Japanese among them. Some of our program graduates went to Columbia University's graduate school from Harvard or from Princeton University to Stanford. There are not only people going to a graduate school after some years' work experience but also people going to a graduate school directly from an undergraduate school. I guess the students in the second category could increase slightly from now on.

The Route H Program

JS: Is your main personal task providing information for students about the entrance exams or application formats for universities overseas?

Ozawa: Yes, that is an important part of my work. Though you can find most of the key information about universities overseas by using the Internet, we provide students with a leaflet containing information such as what kind of education is available at each university abroad and how they can prepare well for entrance exams.

We also publish a leaflet titled "Route Book 2018" which is a sort of US version in which we provide students with a number of college application success stories as well as rankings of the best US universities and information on their college applications. Students can learn about how their successful predecessors prepared for college applications.

JS: What do you think is the most difficult part of college applications for universities overseas? Would English be the most challenging part of preparations?

Ozawa: Not necessarily. We select seven points as necessary conditions for passing the college applications for the best US universities. Whether you succeed or fail will depend upon the total assessment of a student's competency, not merely English language skill.

First of all, you must have a very good academic achievement at your high school. Secondly, you must gain high scores on the TOEFL and the SAT, a standardized test. In addition, extracurricular activities or a history of academic awards would be considered. International awards such as one at the International Mathematical Olympiad would be highly valued.

On these points, you must prepare by yourself before becoming a senior at high school. When you are a senior at high school, you have to concentrate on preparations for college application essays. Our Route H program provides guidance for essays as well as for the SAT.

JS: The ability to write a college application essay may not be well developed among Japanese high-school students. Is such an essay difficult for Japanese students?

Ozawa: Yes, it is. To get accepted by Harvard or other elite American

universities, they would need to write essays. Among the documents to be written for an application, there is a personal essay. This seems to be a challenge for many students in Japan. In this essay, you are required to show, not to tell, your personality. Without being able to analyze yourself, you would find this very difficult. In the case of Harvard, only 2,000 students are accepted from around 40,000 applicants. Among those accepted, the percentage of students coming from outside the US is about 10%. Therefore, Japanese applicants would need to make their essays stand out from the rest. At Princeton, they ask you to write a short essay on your favorite film or book. In this case as well, you have to think about how to present yourself in talking about your favorite film or book rather than simply saying “Star Wars is my favorite film.”

JS: They will need the capacity to think independently, besides English language ability.

Ozawa: Yes, they would need the capacity to think about many subjects, and they would also have to be creative in telling stories about themselves.

JS: How long do you think is necessary for them to improve their essay-writing ability? When do you think they should start preparations for such an exam?

Ozawa: There are many students coming to our school as sophomores or high-school seniors. This is because, as I said, there are many things they need to do themselves to prepare for the college applications besides learning at a school. However, ideally, it would be better to start preparations with a well-considered plan after finding out how they should prepare at the earliest time possible.

JS: While the Japanese education system tends to produce people with few individual distinctions from others and who are less able to adjust to any kind of work, the best universities abroad seem to look for students with peculiar capacities or personalities.

Ozawa: Yes. For example, Harvard thinks highly of diversity and tries to get a variety of students. We are impressed by the fact that both students with stunning talent in a specific area and students with competency higher than average in many areas are accepted by Harvard. This is most widely observed in the US, while in the United Kingdom or Canada students with high scores in all the subjects' exams on average would be more easily accepted.



The Future of Route H Graduates

JS: Do you think the number of Japanese students aiming to study abroad at elite universities will continue to increase hereafter?

Ozawa: According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, a little less than 19,000 students from Japan were studying at US universities in FY 2015. After a continuous decline since the burst of the bubble economy in Japan in the 1990s to 2012, the number of students has been picking up. Though we do not know the percentage of undergraduate and graduate students in this total, the number of Japanese applicants for Harvard has more than doubled since three years ago.

In addition, the scholarship systems for students aiming to study abroad are increasing, such as the Yanai Tadashi Foundation started by Tadashi Yanai, owner of the giant apparel retailer UNIQLO, or the Masason Foundation started by Masayoshi Son, owner of IT giant Softbank. Such scholarships are encouraging competent students who gave up trying to study abroad for pecuniary reasons to reconsider studying overseas and thus pushing up the number of students studying abroad.

JS: But might this lead to increasing inequality?

Ozawa: Yes, I guess it might. But looking at the Japanese Education Ministry's data, we see an increase in students studying abroad for a

short period. Under the globalization of Japanese universities' programs, students undertaking short-term or mid-term studying abroad are increasing as well. It is interesting to see the number of students having overseas studying experience for a short period increasing between the inward-looking students and the elite students pursuing academic careers at the best universities abroad. I hope many students will have an opportunity to experience a student's life abroad in a wide variety of patterns and thus social inequalities would not become so significant.

JS: What professional careers are Route H graduates mostly choosing after graduating from the best universities overseas?

Ozawa: We have only around 10 graduates from Route H who have started working after graduating from a university so far. Seven of them have got jobs in Japan, either in a foreign subsidiary or in a Japanese company's global business operation section. Some got jobs in US companies, though it was difficult to get a working visa.

Making Japanese Universities More Attractive for Students

JS: What do you think should be done to make Japanese universities more attractive to keep the elite students in Japan?

Ozawa: Let me think about the strength of universities overseas in general at first. Elite US universities, for example, maintain diversity among students, attracting many good students from abroad, and are thus successful in providing a good learning environment where students are competing with each other to improve their competency. In addition, in such US universities, you can study liberal arts regardless of your specialty, such as natural science or social science. You can take a gap year easily and also you can enjoy flexibility in choosing your majors, enabling you to take two majors. You can also enjoy more discussion in your class rather than just listening to lectures by professors.

To be competitive, a Japanese university would need to introduce such merits. Another way a Japanese university could be more competitive would be to locate the most advanced research facilities in a university, since a school where you can learn about cutting-edge technology would prove very popular. I think learning about disaster management would be one way of attracting good students in Japan, since the country is prone to natural disasters.

JS: I wish that Japanese universities could attract more students from overseas. In reality, this does not seem to be the case, though.

Ozawa: I think Japanese universities are doing their best to attract foreign students. But to tell the truth, the names and the appealing points of those universities are not well known in the world. In this light, Benesse Corporation, in collaboration with Times Higher Education (THE) in the UK that publishes "THE World University Rankings", published "THE Japan University Rankings" in March 2017. Though research capacity is a core element in the world rankings, our Japanese version focused on education. In our ranking, done for the first time in 2017, first place was given to the University of Tokyo and second place to Tohoku University. We hope such a ranking will encourage competition among Japanese universities and eventually be a key in attracting foreign students by promoting their strengths to the world.

Finally

JS: Do you have a plan to enrich your Route H education program?

Ozawa: We will continue to do our best to increase the number of students accepted by elite universities abroad. We still have much room to do so, given that Korean students studying in the US are about five times as many as Japanese even though the Korean population is around half the Japanese population. I think for this purpose it will be important to provide information about Route H for students in regional areas and for younger students. Having worked on Route H for many years, I found so many good universities abroad that are not well known in Japan. Some of our Route H graduates have got good results at one of those universities. Some are continuing to study at graduate schools and some after graduating from a junior college or community college have enrolled at elite universities to continue studying. By introducing such examples to our students, we would like to boost the number of students studying abroad as much as possible. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.