

R oundtable on Japanese Tertiary Education as Seen by a Diverse Student Panel

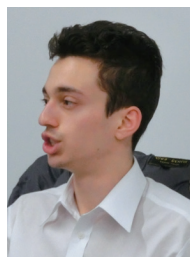
By Japan SPOTLIGHT

When evaluating any educational system, it is paramount to include the perspective of those most affected by it: the very students who are currently studying. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* organized an ethnically and gender diverse panel of college students studying at two universities, Keio University and Soka University, to hear more about what they think of college life in Japan.

The Keio students belong to the US-Japan Partnership class at Keio University, while the Soka students belong to the Global Cultures Seminar at Soka University. Both the class and the seminar are taught by Professor Mukesh Williams.

(Roundtable on Jan. 10, 2018)

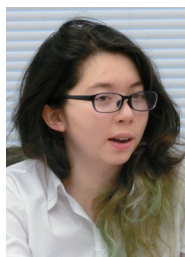
Participants



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Elea Roger
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Marshall Sherrell
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Anri Takahashi
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Self-Assessments

Haraoka: Thank you very much for coming, everyone. Today we are going to discuss the implications of education on your futures. Let's begin by a self-assessment of each person's education, including that of your current university. In other words, please introduce yourself.

Takahashi: Hi, my name is Anri Takahashi. I am at Keio and I study literature. I think my education so far is "prestigious". I have successfully passed educational examinations all the way from elementary school to college. This is thanks to my parents, who are not super-rich but place a great value on education. We were able to afford private school, cram school and study abroad in America. So far, this has been my educational experience.

Haraoka: What do you think of Keio? You're going to graduate soon.

Takahashi: I think other Keio students are in the same situation. They also went through many examinations for private school and their financial backgrounds are relatively good. So, the same as me.

Roger: My name is Elea Roger. I attend Soka University and study letters. I'm from France so until high school, I was in the French educational system. I think it was normal enough. (There is no "normal" system I think.) I wouldn't say my middle school was international but there was lots of focus on English, which made it somewhat unique. For high school, I went to a Christian school, which is pretty common in France. They're not particularly religious but mine mandated one hour a week for volunteering work or religious studies. I would say it was a good school but not elite. Both schools I went to were private, but private schools are common in France and they are less expensive than in Japan. European private schools are generally cheaper, although perhaps not in England.

For university I'm majoring in letters. I would say I have a Japanese-English education there and it is interesting because it is very broad. I had many classes in letters and was able to, in the same semester, study literature, international relations, sociology, history, some science and economics. I was able to do this even though I am studying letters so I think this gives me a broad perspective. Last year I spent one year in the United States, abroad, and studied theater, literature and cinema.

Yokokawa: My name is Harumi Yokokawa. I'm a senior at Soka



University and I study literature. Until, during and even somewhat after high school I was really confused. The things I learned couldn't be used in real life situations. For example, I was in the dance club. I was adept at dancing and my organization won a national prize but doing this didn't help me to solve real-life problems like relationships and the actual issues in front of me.

But then I entered Soka University and met Professor Mukesh Williams. I thought he had made very strong statements about life and how people think. At first, I was shocked to hear things like this. We were asked to write summaries of classes and it was when I did this that I realized he had a point. He taught us how to understand ourselves and appreciate ourselves and he connected the ideas of knowledge we learn, Western education, to real-life situations.

For example, in his seminar we learned about Western philosophy, Vedic philosophy and Buddhist philosophy and we learn how Western education is shaped through ideas. We learn from Heidegger and Foucault, as well as Vedic texts. These subjects relate to my real life because they are about the philosophy of how people think. So I was able to connect ideas with real life and real relationships with people. My own behavior improved. In my sophomore year I went to St. Stephen's College in Delhi and did research on academic excellence and further tried to understand what is "well-being" and what are the key points to live a happier life.

I'm in my senior year now and just finished my paper on Junichiro Tanizaki's novel *Naomi* and how it represents the failure of modernization. It was a good end to my college years.

Crisias: My name is Benoit Crisias. I was born in Japan and lived here until I was five. I did nursery school here and then moved to France. I completed elementary, middle and high school in France. And then I did one year of prep school in Paris. I learned so much that year. It really built me academically.

After that, I moved here to Soka University and did my first year.

I study literature. Since in Japan the school year begins in April (as opposed to September in France), after I finished my prep school in France I had to wait until April. So instead of just waiting, I went to university for six months since this is inexpensive to do in France. Thanks to this I was able to experience both systems of higher education and I can tell a bit what kind of differences there are between France and Japan.

Haraoka: Maybe you can tell us later which you like best.

Post: I'm Iwan Post and I'm from the Netherlands. I am studying international relations. After high school, I went to university for four years in the Netherlands at two different universities and am here at Keio on an exchange program. I can only judge it based on its English language curriculum for exchange students like me. If I were to compare those courses to the ones I did at home in the Netherlands, the difference is flabbergasting. For example, sometimes the teacher's English isn't so good and they struggle to be understood. I also sometimes wonder how a student can attend 14 classes a semester and pass all of them simply by writing one paper each class. If you were to take 14 classes in the Netherlands, you would have to do more. Perhaps expectations are higher in the Netherlands but I must say, I expected more from Japan.

Perhaps if I attended the regular Japanese language classes then the level would be higher but I didn't have a chance to do this.

Sherrell: Greetings everyone, my name is Marshall Sherrell and I am studying at Keio University on the Keio International Program. I double major in English and Japanese at the University of Washington in Seattle. The most interesting part of my education happened well before college. I grew up in a low-income family and quit going to school in grade school. This wasn't legal but I did it because I hated school at the time. Eventually, I went back to school



because of a court order that forced me to either re-attend or face juvenile detention. My plan at the time was to drop out again at the first legally permissible moment, when I turned 16, because I didn't want to be there.

A little less than a year before I turned 16, I looked at the people around me who *did* drop out and that was one of the first times in my life that I became self-reflective and thought about my future. I was comfortable with not making a lot of money but I didn't like the idea of not being able to do what I wanted. That's why I decided to pursue further education. I continued school and brought my grades up. I graduated from the top of my class at a small high school and then went on to college.

Haraoka: What do you think about Keio?

Sherrell: Contrasted with American universities, it's not as difficult. In the West they tend to have a rubric in how they grade students and teachers. Everyone is held to an objective standard. That is, teachers have to explain why they gave any particular grade. They can grade as they see fit but are accountable in this way.

At Keio it seems like there's a grading system of As, Bs and Cs, the teacher gives one of these to each student, and that's it. That's a key difference to me. There's also much fewer classes per semester in the US. I'm taking seven this semester but in America that would be unusual. I actually know students at Keio taking nine or more. But the difference there is that unlike in the US, these classes only meet once a week. I think it's difficult to go over class material only once a week before the test. On the other hand, I can say that my experience here has been eye opening in a lot of ways, especially outside of the classroom. There are certainly many differences between the American and Japanese educational systems.

Technology & Education

Haraoka: This is such a diverse group and everyone has their own unique experience. Let's move on to a question about the impact of technology on education. In particular, I believe computers could play an important role in education. Thanks to computers, education can be customized to the individual. I think it's natural for all of us to some extent to have qualms about the education we receive. Normally it's uniform, right? Applied to everyone and not applied to any one unique person's needs. But computers could make this possible. What do you think of the role of computers? Do you agree?

Crisias: That's an interesting question. Either we have a uniform education that is the same for everyone or we have an education from a computer. I think it's interesting to think that a human being could potentially be raised by computers. In practice though, I think

it's insane. To me, human beings can only be raised by other human beings. I don't know how a computer could *inspire* anything in human beings. For example, even if I don't remember all the things I learned in my education, I *do* remember the behavior of my teachers and how they were as human beings.

Haraoka: I agree with you. But we are living in a society where anybody anywhere can and has to use computers. What do you think of this?

Crisias: Perhaps we can divide education into two parts. One is transmitting knowledge. The other is transmitting values. The former can be done by computers but the latter must be done by humans.

Takahashi: I think computers are important for inputting knowledge. But for outputting knowledge, students need a place to meet and discuss what actual humans think about the theme or the study. Some questions have no specific answer and their real value is their ability to prompt a discussion. Of course, this could happen online. So I believe Artificial Intelligence (AI) is useful for input but for output we need human teachers.

Yokokawa: I think AI and technology are good for giving information because they're full of data but students need a teacher or guide to connect this information to their real lives. Without that, even if students have information, if they feel it's not connected to real life then they won't use it. So they need a teacher who can guide them to help shape how we use this knowledge in real life. I think those teachers must have a broader area of knowledge so they won't simply inform but help students build connections. This will help solve problems like depression, anxiety and loneliness that we all face in the post-modern era.

Socialization & Computers

Haraoka: I have heard that some young people prefer talking to computers rather than talking to people because they are happier and more comfortable doing this. They don't have to worry about being insulted or making someone upset.

Post: To be frank I think this relates more to Japanese society than the larger world. In Europe, we'd rather have social contact than contact with a computer. AI is smart but only about certain things. In those things, it can have huge influence on daily life, like making coffee automatically or telling you the weather. But we don't need to push beyond this limit. Human interaction is crucial and human beings drive this, not computers in my opinion.



Roger: In Japan people are more afraid of confronting others. I see so many people talking online. They want to feel connected without the trouble of relationships. People are too tied into the Internet world. Moreover the Internet is like an infinite library of data in your pocket. It's incredible but all it gives you is information. It doesn't help you learn *how* to learn. Perhaps AI can eventually design courses on its own. But a system that contains humans faces the difficulty of managing *how* they learn and *how* they think. When you ask a computer to do something — such as tell you the weather — it will give you a definitive answer. But ask a human this and you could get a much broader answer, perhaps on an entirely different subject.

A teacher's role isn't just teaching. If it was just giving information, that's the same as a book. Similarly, the Internet is simply a lot of books. Unlike a book, the teacher is there to ask questions and give answers tied to a specific student. Perhaps AI could eventually replace a teacher. But speaking only for myself, I need the teacher to be interesting to take an interest in a course. If a teacher isn't, no matter what the class, I just want to leave. I actually choose classes based on teachers.

Sherrell: Let's approach it from a different angle. If you were to abandon an educational standard and allow full customization of education, that would open the door to a lot of problems. If computer education is about customization, then it should be able to adapt to any student at any level of progress. Like if a student is falling far behind and in danger of failing school — and society. That's the issue; customizing education in these instances could produce adults without the proper skill sets to contribute to society.

Haraoka: That's right. It relates to entrepreneurship. Computer education could encourage entrepreneurship because it's customized.

Sherrell: I think we're close to the point where if we put more focus on computers we'd get diminishing returns. With access to the Internet we can get any info we want. It's become normal for students to cite most of their sources from the Internet. In Japan I don't have access to many physical books but I *can* access them online. So technology is being used to great benefit. But if we become *dependent* on this, that may actually stifle creativity. I think you can see this now with the emerging generation. A lot of kids aren't actually creative in my opinion because we have access to things which are proven to shorten our attention spans. So kids now learn how to use the Internet from age four and as a result don't actually learn how to read books. Maybe you could argue that is just substituting one form of media over another. But the ability to read and express thoughts in written form is indispensable and that makes a big difference. Too much technology may prevent young people from achieving this.

Haraoka: Someone talked about philosophy and technology. Do you think technology can impact philosophy? Someone said that human relationships, particularly in Japan, seem to be greatly changed due to computers. Is that a negative outcome of computers?

Yokokawa: I think so and it's the reality we see today. But it's also because of the education we have now: Western-style, consumerist and based on a self-gain system because we're in a capitalistic society. With only this, we can't face loneliness or other true human issues because we've lost the connection between the environment and ourselves. This is in contrast to Vedic or Buddhist traditions that emphasize not using the environment for self-gain but being one with it and working with others. If we don't emphasize this in our education and training systems, the problem will increase and we will be unable to build a stable society.

Haraoka: What is it about computers that makes them different from humans in an educational context?

Crisias: Consideration, love and care. Computers can't do any of these. They can't sympathize. No one can be fully satisfied with only computers. Even if someone claims so, it's not true.

Education's Role in Facing Global Challenges

Haraoka: Let's move to a question on global challenges. We are facing many challenges, like income inequality and climate change. Does a university education provide the opportunity to learn about them?

Yokokawa: It does. We learn about these in university and also through media. But in actuality, the countries creating these problems, like those with aging societies, are the “developed” ones like Japan, the US and countries in Europe. We ourselves are the ones creating all these problems. So there must be something wrong with the education systems. We create them but we also say they’re wrong.

Post: I don’t think education and research is to blame on this issue. In terms of things like aging societies and climate change, lots of research is already published and that’s education. Society itself is the problem. Education is doing a great deal and maybe we should invest more so we can do more research and create more awareness.

Roger: In terms of challenging those problems, education is needed because if we don’t have basic information we can’t solve them. We need the basic knowledge of what constitutes climate change and an aging society. Education’s role is to say why is a society aging and what are the consequences of this. Only by understanding this can we create change. We need people to be more concerned, so not just through more education but also through a greater media focus on these issues.

Crisias: We can add more knowledge of environmental issues. There is too much of a lack of information in current education. Even if a greater educational focus causes only one more person to care, that’s better.

Sherrell: I have a question for Benoit and Harumi. You guys said the same thing about how society had prioritized global issues like climate change. But what I’m wondering is what can be done to reorder that. We recognize it as a problem but it’s a problem within the capitalistic society that itself places certain individuals over others. This is synergistic to the point where I don’t think simply putting information out there will make a difference.

So for example, my country, the US, contributes a lot to pollution. But the highest contributor is China. Both countries know the challenges created by pollution and certainly are aware of how they’re contributing to them but are also aware of the economic implications or, as we say, money talks. So what do you think could be done to address this issue given this additional element?

Yokokawa: The reason for this focus on money is a fundamental issue with Western thinking. Even Heidegger talks about this; the Western focus on gain, domination and control. By contrast, I’ve learned that Eastern literature focuses more on harmony and connections with the environment and nature. So if we have proper

training and give students opportunities to learn this way of thinking, I think that would create people with those sorts of minds and slowly create a society of people who can work together holistically.

Education & Income Inequality

Haraoka: Let’s move to another challenge: income inequality. Globalization is believed to cause income inequality. Smart people can accustom themselves to globalization but less skillful people can’t. We see what is termed populism causing political instability in the world. What can education do to mitigate this problem, knowing that education is part of the bedrock of democracy?

Crisias: I think nationalism is the true problem. I don’t think giving power to the people is bad. I think it’s the purpose of education and society. It’s nationalism that is the problem.

Post: If you look at the long-term development of the world, you’ll see a large gap between rich and poor because of globalization. But in the big picture everyone wins. Distribution is the issue and education can play a key role. It is key to inform people about inequalities and to distribute things on a global scale through development aid and foreign investment.

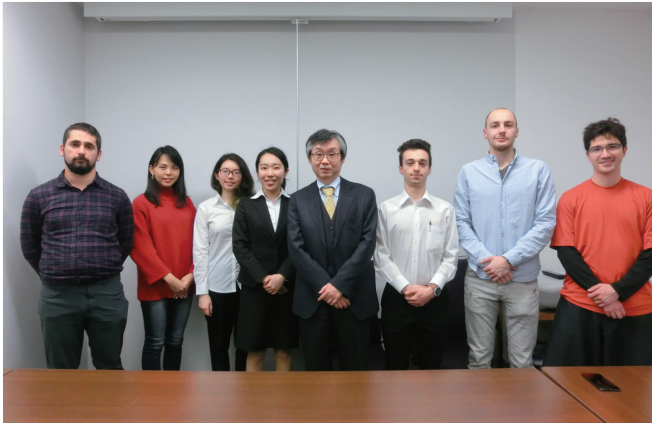
Takahashi: I can’t say for sure but I think education provides us with multiple career choices that let people earn more money. But I think we need to step back to an essential question — why do white-collar workers, like those who work for a bank, earn more money than blue-collar workers collecting garbage? Collecting garbage is more connected to the needs of daily life and certainly very important, but they earn less than people working for a bank. I wonder why this happens.

Post: It’s because the bank workers have responsibility.

Takahashi: The garbage collectors do too. I wonder how education can explain this income gap. I think education actually has the potential to reproduce income inequality. For example, people from first-generation college families can never imagine what university is like or why it’s good to go to university. So before we focus on education itself, to ensure equality we need to let all people understand its importance.

Sherrell: I think that there’s aspects in how education can mitigate inequality and how it can have the opposite effect. If you consider basic literacy, that’s something empowering. People who are literate can defend themselves legally and are harder to exploit.

However, I would also note that even though education rates are



increasing, there is still disparity in wealth in places where people are highly educated. Some schools are less about teaching intelligent people than they are about being funnels for rich and connected students to prestigious positions. Ivy-league students typically come from privileged backgrounds and their university education is simply another endorsement on their way to the upper class. And the institutions themselves hardly stand for economic equality; some Ivy-league universities have more money than entire countries.

Haraoka: Well-being is the ultimate goal of education, ideally. Do you think the current education system works well to achieve happiness as opposed to wealth?

Sherrell: I would say it does in the US, as it imparts a certain level of status to the recipient of that education. Similarly, in Japan, going to university is something that puts you in line with other people in society who are accomplished and productive. As Elea said, it allows you access to most jobs you might want to do.

Post: In my opinion, education can contribute to well-being and happiness but this is a personal thing for any individual. Everyone is different. In my four years of university I learned most about happiness and well-being not in lectures but in social interactions with other people.

Crisias: I think it's impossible to ensure this connection. Happiness is different for everybody so there's no education that can provide happiness uniformly.

Takahashi: In my case, I think education contributed both to my wealth and happiness. In terms of wealth, education — especially university education — leads to a high salary in Japan. But on the other hand, regarding happiness, I think education allows a student

to learn of multiple ways to be happy. By broadening my possibilities, education helped me construct my own “prestigious” situation. It helped me to pursue a happy life.

The Liberal Arts

Haraoka: Liberal arts seem to provide well-being but to my knowledge they are not flourishing in Japanese universities. What do you think of a liberal arts education?

Post: Ethics is a really big thing nowadays. If computers become more and more powerful there must be boundaries to contain them and these must be based on ethics.

Roger: I believe that ways of thinking are important to learn, in other words, philosophy. But in Japan, they present Western philosophy but lack the pedagogy to present their own philosophies. I learned about Greek and European philosophers in class here but only a little about Japanese and Asian philosophers. They have so much to teach and so much opportunity to transmit their ideas but they don't seem to take advantage of these.

Crisias: I feel the same. Philosophy here is rich but it's like no one cares. We have to find it ourselves outside of class if we want to learn it.

Sherrell: Class has to do with it. We're mostly literature majors here but most Keio University students — and students at my home university — aren't like us. In both Japan and America, liberal arts degrees are being marginalized. People instead often go for more lucrative majors because college education is so expensive as well as being almost obligatory to get a decent job. If you come from a low-income family, your parents will be focused on the tuition bill and potential debt, so they want to know the bottom line. I agree with the importance of liberal arts degrees but it's difficult to communicate this to someone who is financially stretched.

Takahashi: The liberal arts give access to broad perspectives but their results are less immediate. The hard sciences give concrete results, but these are limited to immediate solutions. We need both.

Roger: It's true that the liberal arts widen knowledge but this can lead to broad but shallow understandings. So we need specializations as well, where students develop individual capacities and skills that can also relate to their professions. Ideally you'd have a mix between specialization and general studies.

Yokokawa: Marshall was saying how elites in America in prestigious

institutions monopolize lucrative jobs and can dominate the world. But I think the rise of anti-elitism is also there. Lower- and middle-class people feel that the elites have gone too far. In India there is violence by the poor and middle classes as a result of this. Slowly people are becoming aware that the ruling class are focused on self-gain. If this keeps on going on there will be another revolution. So there must be a change in people's thinking.

Haraoka: No single person can solve an issue without collaboration. Do you think the current educational system encourages collaboration?

Post: In the courses I took so far in Keio, I did a lot of group work and learned from other people. But in my own university we have group presentations and projects. Keio can learn from that model and focus more on teamwork, which will give students opportunities to learn more about other cultures.

Takahashi: Iwan is talking about international student classes but I know about regular classes, which have small groups and group presentations. Currently Keio does have classroom collaboration but only among Japanese people, not for international situations yet.

Roger: In Soka they are aiming for collaboration skills and promoting active learning and trying to make more classes for group work. In certain ways this works as it permits students to be more concentrated and active inside a class by also participating in it. But some Japanese have a tendency to overuse that term and try to implant it in classes where I do not think it is needed or in a shallow way. Some are great, but in big courses collaboration is only done for cosmetic purposes and we're talking about nothing. Maybe this is the same in any country.

Future Expectations from Education

Haraoka: My last question is, what do you expect overall from education in the future?

Sherrell: I think that as the world progresses toward greater globalization there's going to be some things that were marginalized that become more important. Speaking as a Westerner who speaks English, the *lingua franca*, I'm sure that foreign language study will become more important in the future as other emerging markets, like China, gain momentum.

Also it's my opinion that the over-emphasis on technology is going to slow down. We're reaching a point where technology is performing essential functions which, though important, don't need to be a focus. Anyone can do them regardless of their specialization.

For example, if you're a marketer you need to know technology but it's been made accessible for most people anyway, so this is not considered to be a special skill for that field. As the emphasis on technological fields of study slows down, things like international studies will become important to anyone who wants a stake in the emerging world, not just international relations specialists.

Post: First, we need to continue as a civilization to give everyone access to education. This is a goal, but there will be complications resulting from this. Focusing on curtailing the expense of education would help.

Crisias: I think it would be good for everyone if education provides more fun. Now we have tools, computers like you said in every classroom. If education is more fun, students learn more. This means efficiency.

Yokokawa: Education should connect all of the information we can access with our own lives and concrete issues. Institutions must train teachers to do this, while at the same time valuing what makes each country unique.

Roger: I would like the education system to have a better emphasis on teachers. When I was in Japan, I heard about monster parents and I heard stories about teachers bearing the brunt of their aggression. I hope the education system can create a better environment for teachers which will then have a better effect on children as teachers are the people responsible for developing the new generation.

Takahashi: I think education should become more diverse. In America I've heard that becoming a professor is difficult due to competition. If these educators are looking for global opportunities, maybe they can move to Japan and teach Japanese students in English. There is increasing demand for this. Thanks to technology, perhaps we can achieve this through online classrooms and Skype. This could also help education to be free.

Haraoka: Thank you so much for your great ideas. This was a very good discussion.

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Written by Benjamin Boas, an American communication consultant and tourism ambassador of Nakano, Tokyo.