

Sharing Skills Between India & Japan Through Academic Exchange Programs: a Case Study of Soka University & St. Stephen's College

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Photo: Saki Takeuchi



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Academic exchange programs are the best way to develop friendship and a lasting relationship between two countries, but their continuation demands sustained effort. In any programs between Japanese and Indian universities, partnerships encounter challenges in ensuring a consistent flow of students. Following the trend of globalization, a lot of new partnerships have been made between universities in these two nations. However, it is hard to keep them active for long. Under such circumstances, the student exchange between Soka University and St. Stephen's College of Delhi University can be said to be a rare success. To understand why it succeeded in fostering long-term relationships, there are seven key factors: 1) Continuous administrative interaction, 2) a shared founding spirit, 3) a trusted study abroad coordinator, 4) a bi-directional flow of exchange students, 5) the integration of quality education with support for daily life, 6) active promotion of study abroad, and 7) the establishment of the St. Stephen's Alumni Association in Japan. This essay initially explores the study abroad trends in both countries, then identifies key factors contributing to lasting relationships between Soka University and St. Stephen's College, offering insights to expand and activate other partnerships between Japan and Indian universities.

Globalizing Education: Indian & Japanese

India actively promotes globalizing education, which appears in the National Education Policy 2020. Key aspects include promoting research collaboration and student exchanges between Indian and global institutions. Within these movements, the number of Indian students pursuing higher education overseas has steadily grown. In 2022, the number of Indian students going abroad surpassed 1,324,000, marking a substantial increase over the years (Ministry of External Affairs, Estimated Data of Indian students studying abroad in 2022). The United States, Canada, UAE, and Australia are the top choices for Indians studying abroad (<https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/GPV/lu3820-1-mar-25-22.pdf>).

Japan has responded to a need to foster global talent through its Student Aid Policy since 2013. A representative example of this is the project called the "Tobitate! (Leap for Tomorrow) Study Abroad Initiative", which aimed to double the number of Japanese students abroad by the year 2020. As a result, the number increased from 70,000 in 2013 to 107,000 in 2019, before the pandemic (Japan Student Services Organization, Survey on Japanese Student Study

Abroad Situation for 2019, 2021, https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/ja/_mt/2021/03/date2019n.pdf). In order to revive the trend, the project continues as the Next *Tobitate* Initiative, targeting 500,000 students dispatched by 2033. This is part of a 10-year government roadmap published in 2023, which also emphasizes globalization within, through an influx of foreign students.

Challenges of Student Mobility

The Jasso survey shows the preferences of Japanese students studying English abroad. Most students go to the US, followed by Australia, Canada, South Korea, the United Kingdom, China, Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines and Malaysia. It also reveals that approximately 17% of Japanese studying abroad are in the science field (https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/ja/_mt/2021/03/date2019n.pdf), indicating that the majority are likely focused on language improvement rather than scientific research. It is worth noting that the Philippines and Malaysia are the chosen places in Asia to study English. Places where English can be learned at a low cost are gaining popularity among Japanese students.

Despite this trend, few Japanese students study in India, as many Japanese do not associate English learning with the country. Japanese individuals seeking low-cost English learning find India appealing, but the absence of fellow students in India makes it an impractical choice. Study abroad programs in the Philippines are provided by numerous agents, leading to a majority presence of ALTs from Asian countries, while India has fewer in both aspects. One possible reason why some Japanese people might hesitate to learn English in India would be their tendency to prioritize the acquisition of an accent somewhat similar to the Americans, rather than the attainment of strong reading or writing skills. Filipino English, influenced by the presence of ALTs, is believed to be closer to authentic English. However, this might be a misunderstanding, as each country has its own characteristics and accent. Even if some Japanese individuals recognize that studying in India is a cost-effective option, they face challenges in pursuing it due to a lack of information. They have no idea where to study in India. India also has an image of chaos; a lack of infrastructure and security issues are also reasons why people do not choose India as a study destination.

According to the Indian government, only 1,300 Indian students studied in Japan in 2022. Without learning the Japanese language,

many interactions become challenging in daily life. Food is another major barrier. The lack of vegetarian food options when eating out is a major problem. For Indians who are not interested in Japan in general, their preferred universities are often not located in Japan, and since there are far fewer top world-ranked universities than in the US or UK, they will not choose Japanese universities if there is no specific field of study that only Japanese universities can offer. Even if there is a field you want to study, difficulty arises when your field isn't taught in English, and understanding Japanese classes becomes time-consuming. The emphasis may shift from expertise to learning Japanese. Making a life plan for job hunting and post-graduation life as a working adult in Japan also poses challenges. Essentially, attaining a certain level of Japanese language skills is necessary to secure a job in any industry, making job hunting difficult. Stringent immigration policies hinder long-term career planning and life in Japan after studying abroad.

In such cases, opting for a country like the US, where alternative career paths and long-term life plans can be made, becomes a preference. Differences in work culture are another barrier. There are many success stories of Indians in the US and other countries where meritocracy prevails, but in Japan, with its seniority system, it is difficult for Indians to do so even if they are talented, making it difficult to dream of a future studying in Japan.

My Personal Experience of Studying at St. Stephen's College

I studied at St. Stephen's College from July 2014 to March 2016, mainly taking an English honors course. My first visit was in February 2014 under a three-week exchange program, and I found that the place was a perfect environment for studying, including both nature and the people. Spending a year and a half at St. Stephen's College enriched my life intellectually. Every aspect of my English – reading, listening, writing, and speaking – greatly improved. As a result, my TOEIC score jumped to 370 marks, and I got a job in overseas sales with a Japanese company listed on the stock market and handled lots of business meetings with overseas clients. Furthermore, I found joy in writing poetry through St. Stephen's College, inspired by lectures and classmates who had a habit of sharing poetry. In the classes, I encountered many great poems that were discussed among friends. "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning became my favorite, as I realized how it gradually revealed the arrogance of the baron. My interest in writing poems had been stimulated by this environment. One day I wrote a poem based on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and shared it with a class.

Continuous support from students and professors led me to this level of English. Life at St. Stephen's College taught me a sense of togetherness with the natural environment. I could feel connected

Photo: Kohei Ono



Reunion with a classmate who used to live in the same residence and share poems.

with greenery everywhere, for example, by lying on the lawn and experiencing the earth, sunshine, wind, flowers, squirrels, and so on. There was no air pollution. As for security, it is ensured that each gate has a guard; an unknown person cannot enter the college. I hope these personal episodes might change the perception of people towards India as a new English learning destination.

Continuous Administrative Interaction

As reported by the Indian Embassy in Japan, there are currently 665 academic partnerships between the two nations. However, enduring interaction is crucial to long-term relationships. The history of academic exchanges between Soka University and St. Stephen's College highlights the importance of continuous administrative interaction. In 1992, a significant event occurred when the founder of Soka University interacted with the principal of St. Stephen's College. This pivotal meeting, facilitated by a St. Stephen's College faculty member linked to Soka University, laid the foundation for a lasting academic and educational exchange agreement between these institutions. A yearly exchange program was established, and the Soka University Award of Highest Honor was bestowed on the principal. In 2014, after about two decades of student exchanges between the two institutions, Soka's Faculty of Letters introduced a 21-day language and culture program at St. Stephen's College. Several faculty members at St. Stephen's College collaborated to deliver lectures. Following this short-term exchange program, the administrative office permitted the three students who wanted to study abroad at St. Stephen's College to do so for the long term. This

21-day training has been conducted annually since 2014, with the exception of the years affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Before that period, only one student was sent each year, but a trend emerged where participants in short-term training could pursue longer-term studies abroad.

On Dec. 7, 2017, the president of Soka University attended Founder's Day at St. Stephen's College. During the ceremony, a citation of merit was conferred upon the founder of Soka University. The recognition was given for efforts in peace activities as well as for building a partnership between St. Stephen's College and Soka University, aiming to promote a better understanding of India in Japan. In 2018, the principal of St. Stephen's College delivered a speech at the entrance ceremony of Soka University as a very special guest, a designation reserved for only one person each year. Professors from both institutions visited each other, one from St. Stephen's College and four from Soka University, engaging in academic research and conducting lectures. One of the Japanese professors stayed for a year and took the initiative to establish a Japanese society at St. Stephen's College, with the assistance of the principal and other faculty members. In 2023, the principal of St. Stephen's College visited Soka University and spoke at an international conference. The principal expressed condolences over the founder's passing and added a memorial page to St. Stephen's College official website. To form a long-term relationship between the two nations, continuous administrative interaction is an essential factor.

A Shared Founding Spirit

The shared founding spirit between Soka University and St. Stephen's College serves as a consistent philosophy directing each institution towards the future. St. Stephen's College, rooted in Christianity, and Soka University, rooted in Buddhism, both share a common commitment to serve society and the world. This shared spirit has played a key role in building their collaborative partnerships. St. Stephen's College, founded in 1881, took inspiration from the University of Cambridge. Later, in 1922, it became one of the three colleges of Delhi University. The College embodies the spirit of *Ad Dei Gloriam*, meaning "To the Glory of God". Freshmen, through daily assemblies led by its principal, are encouraged to embrace a religious way of life based on serving the community, drawing inspiration from the Bible. This emphasis is on a commitment to serve and contribute to the welfare of humanity, extending beyond Christian principles and applicable to all students. Soka University, founded in 1971, is committed to global peace with the founding spirit, "Be a fortress for the peace of humankind." It aims for open dialogue with all the peoples of the world. Based on this spirit, the founder used to make speeches in assemblies to

encourage students towards social justice and peacebuilding. This common purpose of both universities, for the benefit of humanity at large, enables them to move in the same direction.

A Trusted Program Coordinator

There must be a stable system of coordination for an education program abroad which can be trusted by both the Japanese and Indians and also which can serve as a bridge between the two sides. For instance, as a part of the coordination program, there is a member of the faculty at Soka University who used to work at St. Stephen's College in the English department and a student residence tutor. Also, he has received the highest award from Soka University and is highly trusted by both institutions. He not only created new programs for both institutions but also acted as a go-between when there was a problem at either institution. Thanks to his intervention, the long-lasting Soka University and St. Stephen's College partnership has continued and developed. Nothing can be well-managed or well-maintained without a coordinator who can think and act in the best interests of both sides.

Bi-directional Flow of Students

In 2014, during my time at St. Stephen's College, a student from a national university wanted to study at Delhi University under their exchange deal. Despite hoping for support from both the Japanese and Delhi University sides, he faced challenges. Sadly, seeking help from Japanese university staff and Delhi University didn't work. Despite the partnership, there was no clear way to communicate. The Japanese student reached out directly to Delhi University. Eventually, he successfully met a principal of St. Stephen's College, and received certification for studying abroad there. A continuous presence of exchange students from both prevents these issues of administrative ignorance and lack of communication.

Quality of Education & Life Support System

Soka University offers a variety of English-medium courses, including economics, business administration, literature, history, and peace studies. The global faculty's proficiency in English creates an international academic environment, making the learning experience richer. This commitment to quality education extends to Soka University's graduate school, which offers high-quality English courses in TESOL, peace studies, and economics. Notably, four exchange students from St. Stephen's College advanced into the graduate programs, and secured a job in their fields after graduation. Japanese language courses at Soka University are designed for different proficiency levels, enabling students to become fluent

within a year. Three exchange students from St. Stephen's College who graduated with fluent Japanese language skills showcase the effectiveness of this program.

Beyond academics, Soka University is dedicated to supporting international students through its international office and international dormitory, from airport pickups to addressing various needs including mental support. They also prepare several cultural events, such as experiencing traditional New Year *osechi* foods during the winter break when other Japanese dormitory mates go back home. This helps prevent international students from feeling lonely.

St. Stephen's College promises high-quality education, promoting English proficiency and specialized knowledge in each department. Even though the lectures are challenging, the supportive environment from professors and other students ensures the academic growth of Japanese students. Their residential life makes it easier to foster friendships. Living with Indian students and immersion into the warmth of Indian culture becomes an integral part of their study abroad. The support goes beyond academics. There is a health center on campus where Japanese students can seek advice and support, including medication and injections if necessary. Some of them who are not used to spicy food may experience stomach upsets. In such cases, the health center responds by providing documents that mandate a change in menus, and the campus cooking staff will then serve non-spicy food accordingly. After their studies abroad, these Japanese students often enter into promising careers such as with international consulting firms, similar to graduates from top Japanese universities. The experience of studying at St. Stephen's College has a lasting impact on their careers.

Promotion of Programs

The influence of an individual can serve as a catalyst in motivating others. One influential student who was leading some club activities at St. Stephen's College decided to study at Soka University after being inspired by a senior's positive experience. This sparked interest in going to Soka University among other juniors. After a one-year exchange program, he returned to Soka University for a master's courses in TESOL. Three exchange students from St. Stephen's College followed the same path and pursued master's degrees in TESOL or peace studies. This highlights the impact of individuals promoting studying abroad. In 2018, the establishment of the Japanese Society at St. Stephen's College with 300 registrations deepened understanding and increased interest in studying abroad among Japanese students.

At Soka University the "World Kai" study abroad consultation room which opens daily, allows juniors to learn from seniors who

have studied abroad. This resource helps juniors understand the realities of studying at St. Stephen's College. They can also contact St. Stephen's alumni society in Japan through related professors. Through interaction with an Indian student from St. Stephen's at the Chitchat club, where foreign students can teach English part-time, some Japanese students determined to study at St. Stephen's College. These structures demonstrate the effectiveness of community engagement in promoting Soka University student exchange with St. Stephen's College.

St. Stephen's Alumni Association in Japan

The St. Stephen's Alumni Association in Japan is a key supporter of the partnership between Soka University and St. Stephen's. It plays a crucial role in bringing people together and moving forward on the path of development. It organizes monthly gatherings led by a Soka faculty member, who was once a professor at St. Stephen's. These meetings focus on the pursuit of a good life and how to help in ongoing projects. Individual alumni contributions are highlighted, such as facilitating job assistance, conducting research for maintaining the partnership, serving as English language professors, and creating professional videos to commemorate 30 years of this exchange program. The Alumni Japan Chapter consistently supports current exchange students from St. Stephen's College by providing connections, life and career advice, and organizing trips. By fostering a community spirit, encouraging individual contributions, and helping current students, the Alumni Association in Japan has become a driving force for long-term synergy and growth between Soka University and St. Stephen's College.

Role of Exchange Programs

The experience at these two institutions reveals that a continuous effort is necessary to build a dynamic relationship between different educational perspectives and methods of teaching. A partnership will always have ups and downs, but they have to be handled carefully. Experienced personnel on both sides must watch carefully for any problems that might emerge and nip them in the bud. The experience between these institutions shows that the difficulties that emerge are well worth resolving to create a partnership not only between two institutions but between two countries. Educational exchanges are the essence of social and global transformation. **JS**

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