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The Experiences and Career Trajectories of Hungarian Students in Japan

— From Survey Data to Narrative Understanding —

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This study examines the academic and intercultural experiences of Hungarian students in Japanese higher education, based on two online surveys conducted in 2023 (N = 65) and 2025 (N = 32). Most participants studied in Japan after 2016, reflecting recent growth in exchange and scholarship programs. The findings reveal a shift from cultural idealism to reflective pragmatism as students adapted to Japan's demanding academic environment while managing social distance and limited feedback. The University of Osaka, a well-established host institution, highlights both the strengths and limitations of Japan's internationalization efforts. The study concludes that intercultural learning occurs not through assimilation but through reflection, underscoring how small European cohorts contribute to Japan's academic diversity and global engagement.

[Keywords] Hungary, international students, intercultural learning, Japanese universities, the University of Osaka

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, Japanese universities have expanded their global outreach, attracting a more diverse student body. However, most studies of international students in Japan have focused primarily on East and Southeast Asian groups. Among these, Hungarian students stand out as one of the smallest yet most consistent European communities. Their experiences show how academic culture, institutional frameworks, and personal motivation combine to shape learning satisfaction and intercultural development.

According to statistics published by the Japanese Embassy in Hungary (2009–2025), between 7 and 24 Hungarian students receive Japanese Government

(MEXT) scholarships each year, covering research, undergraduate, and Japanese-language programs. (1) These figures exclude university-level exchanges or self-funded studies, which further expand opportunities for academic mobility.

Based on the current survey data, roughly 70% of respondents studied in Japan through MEXT-supported programs, while about 30% participated in university exchange programs or privately funded courses.

Although Embassy records do not specify host institutions, the data demonstrate the steady continuity of academic exchange between Hungary and Japan over nearly two decades.

This study draws on two anonymous online surveys conducted by the author in 2023 (N = 65)

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and 2025 (N = 32) to examine Hungarian students' experiences in Japanese higher education. The surveys assessed motivations, academic supervision, classroom interactions, and post-study reflections. Although overall satisfaction was high, many respondents reported challenges, including social distancing and limited guidance in academic and administrative areas. These findings provide an empirical basis for understanding the complexity of student experiences and intercultural learning within Japan's higher education system from a Central European perspective.

Using the tripartite framework of motivations, experiences, and outcomes proposed by Huang and Chen (2022) in their study of international students in Japan, this paper applies the model to a European setting, offering new insights into how small, culturally diverse groups engage with and reinterpret the structures of Japanese academic life.

2 Background and Literature Review

2-1 Internationalization in Japanese Higher Education

Japan's higher education internationalization has been shaped by major government initiatives, including the Global 30 Project (2009) and the Top Global University Project (2014), both aimed at expanding English-medium instruction (EMI) and attracting a more diverse student body. These reforms increased the international visibility of Japanese universities and encouraged institutions to adopt English-taught degree programs and double-degree partnerships.

However, as Ota (2018) and Kuroda et al. (2018) observe, such top-down initiatives have not fully addressed the deeper pedagogical and cultural challenges of internationalization. Although the number of students from East and Southeast Asia has grown steadily, European representation remains comparatively small. Many European cohorts, including Hungarian students, enter Japanese universities as cultural minorities in programs primarily oriented toward Asia.

In this context, EMI often serves as a gateway rather than a guarantee of inclusion. Faculty preparedness, classroom interaction patterns, and assessment methods vary widely across institutions. Courses taught in English are often grounded in Japanese academic traditions that emphasize hierarchical communication, implicit feedback, and high expectations of self-discipline, and they enroll students with a wide range of English proficiency levels.

2-2 Central and Eastern European Students

Students from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) form a small but distinctive segment of Japan's international student population. Although their numbers are limited overall, their experiences reveal unique intersections of cultural expectations and educational traditions. For many Hungarian students, Japan represents both an admired model of academic rigor and a culturally intriguing counterpart to Europe.

Research on CEE mobility to Japan remains limited but is gradually increasing within Japanese academia. Yong Su An (2018) conducted a PAC (Personal Attitude Construct) analysis of four Eastern European short-term students, including one Hungarian, who studied in Japan for a year. The study found that participants viewed Japanese students as polite yet distant, valued Japan's safety and service orientation, and often connected more deeply with international peers than with domestic classmates. This combination of admiration and emotional distance closely mirrors the trends observed in the current Hungarian survey data.

Similarly, Nagisa Moritoki (2016) examined the situation of dyslexic Japanese language learners in CEE countries and observed that universities in Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland often have smaller class sizes, personalized teaching, and close relationships between instructors and students. These features stand in stark contrast to the hierarchical structures and implicit communication styles commonly seen in Japanese higher education.

Building on this foundation, Huang et al. (2025)

argue that Japan's recent internationalization policies reflect a shift toward "responsible and risk-aware" engagement, with global geopolitical considerations increasingly shaping educational collaboration. For smaller partner regions, such as Central and Eastern Europe, this framework presents both opportunities and challenges. Within this broader policy context, Hungarian students' experiences offer valuable micro-level insights into how individuals navigate structural systems of cultural differences.

By situating Hungarian participation within the evolving Japan-CEE academic relationship, this study offers an important European perspective on research into intercultural adaptation in Japanese higher education.

2-3 Intercultural Learning and University Experience

Theoretical perspectives in intercultural education (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2020) emphasize reflection and self-awareness as central to meaningful learning. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic fluency or social integration, these frameworks highlight curiosity, empathy, and adaptability as indicators of intercultural growth.

Applying these concepts, the present study interprets Hungarian students' experiences not merely as reactions to cultural difference but as ongoing processes of self-learning in structured, demanding institutional environments. Their narratives show how intercultural competence develops through navigating implicit expectations, responding to ambiguity, and cultivating patience and autonomy in Japan's distinctive academic culture.

3 Survey Findings (2023 and 2025)

3-1 Participants

The 2023 survey collected 65 valid responses (50 women, 15 men) from Hungarian nationals who had studied at multiple Japanese universities. The 2025 survey produced 32 additional responses (21 women, 11 men), focusing on alumni reflections and career outcomes after return.

Respondents' home universities in Hungary included Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, and the University of Szeged.

In the 2023 survey, the most frequently mentioned host universities were the University of Osaka, Kyoto University, Josai University (including Josai International University), Ritsumeikan University, Yokohama National University, and Tohoku University. The 2025 survey showed a similar pattern, adding Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Waseda University, and several other national and private institutions. Although detailed institutional data were available only for the 2023 cohort, both surveys indicate consistent participation across Japan's major universities that offer English-medium or exchange-focused programs. Fields of study included, among others, engineering, economics, Japanese language and culture, and humanities.

Respondents' ages at the time of the 2023 survey ranged from 20 to 49 years, with the largest group between 24 and 29. The most common age was 26 (10.8%), followed by 25 and 27 (7.7% each). These figures show that most participants were young adults in their mid-twenties when they completed the survey, although some older respondents also participated.

According to the 2025 dataset, participants' study periods in Japan ranged from 1985 to 2025, with the most concentrated after 2016. Clear peaks appeared in 2018-2019, 2022-2023, and 2023-2025.

Across both surveys, the average study duration was about 14 months, though it varied widely by program type. In the 2023 dataset, the most common length of stay was one academic year (around 10-12 months), typically covering two semesters. Several respondents reported multi-year enrollment in master's or doctoral programs, lasting up to five or even seven years. In contrast, others noted shorter stays of one semester or less through exchange or language study programs.

The 2025 survey confirms this distribution: 42% of respondents spent 6 to 12 months in Japan, 36%

stayed longer than 2 years, and about 15% studied for 1 to 2 years, with only a few reporting stays of less than 6 months.

3-2 Motivations and Satisfaction

Both surveys asked participants to rate key aspects of their study experience on a ten-point scale. Items assessed overall university satisfaction, course quality, institutional and instructor support, and interactions between international and Japanese students.

Overall satisfaction was high: 64.6% rated their experience 8 or higher, and only 7% rated it 5 or lower. Instructor support was generally positive but varied: 42% described professors as supportive, while 29% reported limited feedback or unclear expectations. Institutional support averaged above 7 points, though comments noted inconsistent administrative guidance.

Social integration received notably lower ratings. Nearly half of respondents reported some level of isolation; 23% experienced frequent loneliness, and 38% cited limited interaction with Japanese peers. Regional universities offered closer interpersonal relationships but fewer organized international activities. These patterns, consistent across both surveys, reveal a key paradox: Hungarian students valued Japan's academic rigor and organization, yet struggled to feel a sense of belonging and to integrate into peer groups.

3-3 Transformation in Perspective

A large majority (89%) agreed that studying in Japan **“changed how I see the world.”** Respondents highlighted independence, patience, and intercultural awareness as key outcomes. Although only 19% later worked directly in Japan-related fields, 71% cited indirect benefits, including improved discipline, communication skills, and openness to diversity.

Comparison of the 2023 and 2025 datasets shows a clear evolution: initial idealism gave way to reflective pragmatism. As participants advanced academically or professionally, satisfaction came to

rest less on cultural fascination and more on mastering ambiguity, interpreting implicit expectations, and building self-reliance.

3-4 Post-Study Decisions and Career Trajectories

Responses regarding post-study location and plans varied, influenced by career prospects and personal adjustment. About 15% of respondents stayed in Japan or planned to live there long-term, often driven by career growth, language use, or personal reasons.

Most (about 70%) returned to Hungary or moved elsewhere. They cited strict work environments, limited career options, and social or emotional stress as the main reasons for leaving. Family responsibilities and visa issues also influenced their decisions.

4 Methodological Reflection

4-1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods exploratory design that combines descriptive statistics with qualitative thematic analysis. The quantitative component identifies overall trends in satisfaction, motivation, and perceived support, while the qualitative narratives illuminate the meanings respondents ascribe to these experiences. This dual approach allows international study to be understood both as an empirical pattern and as a reflective process of self-learning (Braun and Clarke 2019; Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

4-2 Dataset and Scope

Surveys were distributed electronically through alumni networks, social media groups for Hungarian students in Japan, university and embassy exchange offices. Closed-ended data were analyzed descriptively; open-ended responses were coded inductively using Braun and Clarke's six-phase model, with cross-checking to ensure consistency. The two datasets were treated as complementary snapshots rather than a continuous panel, enabling comparison of tone and self-perception between current students

and alumni.

4-3 Limitations and Strengths

As a self-reported, volunteer-based survey, it may be subject to retrospective or self-selection bias and cannot establish causal relationships. Institutional variation also limits comparability. Its strength lies in combining numerical accuracy with narrative depth, illustrating how intercultural adaptation unfolds in daily academic life.

5 Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Open-ended responses revealed a mix of admiration and frustration. Students consistently praised the rigor, order, and intellectual seriousness of Japanese higher education, yet many also struggled with limited feedback, unclear grading, and a general sense of isolation.

5.1 Academic and Personal Experience

Satisfaction and challenge thus became inseparable parts of the same learning experience. Many participants arrived expecting cultural exploration but ended up immersed in rigorous coursework, leaving little free time. Their satisfaction grew as they gradually adopted the norms of punctuality, collaboration, and respect for hierarchy that defined daily academic life. Professors' expectations for self-management required students to adapt quickly, fostering resilience and strategic communication.

Social interaction followed a similar pattern. Relationships among international students were typically close and supportive, reinforced by shared dormitories, courses, and program activities. By contrast, contact with Japanese peers was often formal and infrequent, a pattern confirmed by survey data.

Respondents frequently described “two parallel groups” on campus: foreign students who formed tight communities and Japanese students who remained polite but distant. Those who joined clubs (*bukatsu*), participated in mentorship programs, or had higher Japanese proficiency experienced more

meaningful integration, learning to interpret silence not as rejection but as another form of communication.

Academic discipline served both as a source of pressure and as a catalyst for growth. Students began to value the precision, diligence, and perseverance characteristic of Japanese scholarly culture, later seeing these qualities as transferable skills that shaped their professional perspectives.

Female respondents noted that politeness often coexisted with limited leadership opportunities, while male students reported feeling pressured to conform to hierarchical structures. Through these contrasts, both groups developed a new understanding of respect and restraint.

Retrospective reflections from the 2025 survey further underscore this transformation. When asked **what they would do differently**, several respondents said they would spend more time improving their Japanese proficiency before arriving, build stronger academic and professional networks, or choose supervisors more carefully. Others wished they had engaged more with local students or explored the country beyond university life. At the same time, many said they would change nothing, considering their experiences complete and fulfilling.

5.2 Career Intentions and Post-Study Aspirations

Responses about careers show that professional goals often stem from a mix of admiration and realism, similar to what's seen in academic life. At the end of their studies, many students expressed a **strong desire to stay in Japan**, whether to use their language skills, gain work experience, or gain first-hand exposure to everyday work life. Some achieved these goals and found jobs at Japanese companies, especially those who completed full degrees locally. Others saw employment as a trial phase: a chance “to try life as a working person in Japan” before choosing a long-term path.

A considerable number of students planned to pursue graduate programs, especially at the master's or doctoral level. Many took advantage of opportuni-

ties through MEXT or university scholarships, viewing Japan as an ideal place for structured research and professional training. At the same time, many participants expected to return to Hungary or other parts of Europe after completing their studies. They intended to apply their Japan-related skills in translation, education, or international business, often working for Japanese companies in Europe. Several highlighted that studying in Japan would provide a “competitive advantage” in European careers.

Not all respondents viewed staying in Japan positively. A smaller but important number expressed concerns about the country’s work culture, mentioning overwork, rigid hierarchies, and mental health issues. Some who initially wanted to stay changed their minds, while others planned to return for shorter work or research visits once they felt more prepared.

Overall, about three-quarters of respondents achieved their immediate post-study goals - whether finding a job, pursuing further education, or returning home – though many later adjusted those goals, taking practical and emotional factors into account.

5-1 The University of Osaka as a Case Study

“Amikor megérkeztem, mindenhol templomokat és hagyományokat vártam. Aztán rájöttem, hogy az időm nagy részét a laborban fogom tölteni.” (*When I arrived, I expected temples and traditions everywhere. Then I realized most of my time would be spent in the laboratory.*) [2023 Survey, R14, studied at Osaka University, 2018–2019] (2)

Among all the universities mentioned in the dataset, the University of Osaka – including its former names, Osaka University and the Osaka University of Foreign Studies – was one of the most frequently cited institutions. Eleven of the ninety-seven respondents (11.3%) had studied there. After its 2007 merger with the Osaka University of Foreign Studies, the University of Osaka combined a long tradition of language education and interna-

tional exchange with intensive graduate-level research. The university maintains partnerships with Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and collaborates across faculties with the University of Szeged, through which several respondents studied.

“Az Oszakai Egyetemen a professzor segítőkész volt, de az angol kurzusok szintje nagyon vegyes volt.” (*At the University of Osaka my professor was helpful, but the English courses varied greatly in level.*) [2023 Survey, R27, studied at Osaka University, 2017–2018]

“A japán diákokkal kevés közös órák volt, így nehéz volt valódi kapcsolatot kialakítani.” (*I had few classes with Japanese students, so it was hard to build real connections.*) [2025 Survey, R15, studied at Osaka University, 2019–2020]

“Osakában könnyebb volt beszélgetni, az emberek közvetlenebbek.” (*In Osaka, it was easier to talk (than in other parts of Japan); people were more straightforward.*) [2023 Survey, R05, studied at Osaka University, 2018–2019]

“Az oktatók támogatóak voltak, de néha elvesztem az adminisztratív rendszerben.” (*The professors were supportive, but I sometimes got lost in the administrative system.*) [2025 Survey, R08, studied at Osaka University, 2020–2021]

Students generally described the University of Osaka as academically challenging yet socially welcoming compared with institutions across Japan. They highlighted the friendliness of Kansai’s communication style but noted persistent divisions between international and Japanese student groups, especially at the graduate level. Respondents also noted differences in faculty support systems; some praised the responsiveness of administrative staff, while others reported difficulties sharing information across departments.

Archival data from the University of Osaka’s OUSSEP (Osaka University Short-term Student

Exchange Program) confirm a continuous Hungarian presence since the program's founding in 1996. (3) Between 1997 and 2010, almost all participants came from the Technical University of Budapest (later Budapest University of Technology and Economics), primarily in engineering. Most of these students stayed for two consecutive semesters, even though the program's usual structure is one semester. Starting in 2014, participation gradually shifted toward the humanities, as students from Gáspár Károli University of the Reformed Church began enrolling in the Graduate School of Language and Culture. After 2019, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) became the main Hungarian partner institution, with the University of Szeged occasionally joining. Over this nearly three-decade period Hungarian participation remained modest - usually one or two students each year - but was remarkably steady.

In addition to OUSSEP, other pathways, such as MEXT scholarships and faculty-level agreements, enabled Hungarian students to study or conduct research at the University of Osaka.

6 Conclusion

The experiences of Hungarian university students in Japan highlight both the achievements and constraints of internationalization in higher education. Students consistently expressed deep respect for the intellectual rigor and organizational discipline of Japanese universities, yet many felt socially distant and emotionally constrained. This combination of admiration and detachment appears to be a structural feature of Japan's academic culture, echoing patterns observed among other Central and Eastern European cohorts (An 2018).

Over time, initial fascination evolved into reflective pragmatism. Through everyday engagement with implicit expectations and demanding academic standards, students learned to navigate ambiguity, cultivate independence, and view hierarchy as an organizing principle rather than a limitation. For most, **studying in Japan was less a path of migra-**

tion than one of transformation, fostering patience, adaptability, and intercultural understanding that endured beyond the university.

University life, more than general cultural exposure, became the central site of learning. In seminars and laboratories, students absorbed values of precision, perseverance, and humility that shaped a long-lasting form of intercultural competence. Although only a few stayed in Japan for work or personal reasons, most returned to Hungary or Europe with strengthened discipline, confidence, and perspective. This shared trajectory reflects a broader Central and Eastern European approach to global education, in which Japan is regarded both as a model of dedication and as a mirror for self-reflection.

Ultimately, the Hungarian experience shows that the essence of international education lies not in scale or language proficiency but in the shared human process of adjustment and insight. When learners engage sincerely with difference, internationalization fulfills its deeper purpose: creating spaces where understanding and transformation emerge through encounter.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

- 1) Embassy of Japan in Hungary. 2025. "Scholarship Information." Last modified December 18, 2025. Embassy of Japan in Hungary. https://www.hu.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_hu/culture_scholarship.html
- 2) All quotations from Hungarian respondents were translated by the author. The original Hungarian wording is included in brackets in the text where relevant.
- 3) Data on OUSSEP participants were compiled from archival records at the University of Osaka and cross-checked with survey information provided by former exchange students.

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