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The Future is Collaborative Learning: Diversity, Collaboration, and the Transformation of Japanese Higher Education Institutions

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In the post COVID-19 years, the concept of collaborative learning has been widely discussed at higher education institutions (HEIs) and has become a driving force for educational reform around the world. In Japan, universities are shifting their focus from merely increasing the number of international students to fostering meaningful “International collaborative learning” (国際共修). This pedagogical approach encourages meaningful interaction between Japanese and international students, moving beyond visible diversity to cultivate intercultural competence, communication skills, and collaborative problem-solving abilities. Faculty members are encouraged to avoid lengthy and complicated lectures, and instead incorporate group work, discussions, and collaborative projects into their classes.

Many Japanese universities are now planning to launch new degree programs based on a balanced participation of domestic and international students. The “Gateway College” at Tohoku University¹, scheduled to open in April, 2027, “College of Design” at The University of Tokyo², scheduled to begin in September, 2027, “Faculty of Global Innovation and Development” at Tokyo Metropolitan University³, planned for April 2028, and the College of Creative Studies at Osaka Metropolitan University⁴, scheduled to open in September 2029, are among the leading examples that would define the changing education system at the Japanese higher education institutions. These programs place diversity and collaborative learning at the core of their educational philosophy. They aim to prepare students not only for local contexts but also for active participation in increasingly diverse and interconnected global communities.

In recent years, diversity and collaborative learning have emerged as essential foundations for educational innovation, intercultural understanding, and sustainable knowledge creation. Collaboration is increasingly becoming a defining characteristic of the future educational landscape. Students from different parts of the world bring diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, values, experiences, and

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https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZRSP698425_S5A021C2000000/?msockid=094654223113630f074a458030c16213 (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

² <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/935754?page=2> (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

³ https://www.kyodo.co.jp/pr/2026-02-13_3992324/ (Accessed on June 11, 2026.) The

⁴ <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/local/kansai/news/20260313-GYO1T00069/> (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

ways of understanding the world. Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge to be managed, contemporary educational theory increasingly recognizes it as a valuable resource for learning, creativity and innovation.

Diverse learning environments expose students to multiple perspectives, encourage critical thinking, and promote the development of intercultural competence. Moreover, the presence of students from different cultural backgrounds provides ample opportunities to analyze complex issues from different angles, develop a deeper understanding, and generate solutions that are more inclusive and applicable for a larger number of people. In such learning environments, individuals are expected to work effectively across cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries. However, it is very important to recognize that the benefits of diversity do not emerge automatically. Educational environments must be intentionally designed to encourage meaningful interaction, mutual respect, and inclusive participation.

Collaborative learning provides an educational framework through which the benefits of diversity can be realized. Collaborative approaches move beyond traditional teacher-centered models by emphasizing dialogue, collaborative projects, shared responsibility, knowledge co-creation, and mutual learning. Shonfeld and Gibson (2019) argue in *Collaborative Learning in a Global World* that global collaborative learning environments create opportunities for learners to engage with peers across geographical and cultural boundaries. Such experiences help students develop global competencies, including intercultural communication, empathy, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving skills. The authors further emphasize that digital technologies have transformed the possibilities for international collaboration by enabling learners to participate in meaningful intercultural exchanges regardless of physical location.

The collaborative learning methods could be an effective source and powerful driver of sustainable educational transformation when collaboration among educators is strategically realized. Voogt, Pieters, and Handelzalts (2019) demonstrate that educational innovation is most effective when teachers work collectively on curriculum design and engage in reflective practice. Collaborative curriculum development enables educators to share expertise, address common challenges, and develop a shared vision for learning. In this way, collaborative learning provides a structure through which diverse perspectives can be transformed into collective knowledge and shared understanding.

Future educational systems must therefore prioritize not only academic knowledge but also the development of collaborative and intercultural competencies. Global challenges such as climate change, migration, social inequality, conflicts and rapid technological change require solutions that transcend national and disciplinary boundaries. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to prepare learners for this reality by fostering educational environments that value diversity, encourage collaboration, and promote innovation.

In conclusion, diversity and collaborative learning are central to the future of higher education. Diversity enriches educational experiences by bringing multiple perspectives into the learning process, while collaborative learning provides the

mechanisms through which these perspectives can be shared, negotiated, and transformed into new knowledge. As Japanese universities continue to internationalize through initiatives such as international collaborative learning, they can create educational environments that prepare graduates to contribute meaningfully to an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world.

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