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Osaka University

## Abstract of Thesis

Name (Adam Gyenes)

Title

Critical Thinking as Concept and Practice in the Internationalization Strategies of Japanese Universities  
(日本の大学の国際化戦略におけるクリチカルシンキングの概念と実行)

## Abstract of Thesis

Critical thinking (CT) receives increasing attention in discourses around the reform and internationalization of higher education in Japan. While the cultural, political and sociological efficacy of teaching CT in the Japanese context has been debated since the 1990s, it has become a key concept with the internationalization of universities through English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs and courses. Seeking to shed light on the way critical thinking is conceived by different stakeholders who have a primary interest in the way that critical thinking is propagated as an educational outcome, this project employed a qualitative, multi-method design. First, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to look at the framing of CT within the mission statements of EMI degree programs. They were found to place emphasis on perspective taking and flexibility as essential qualities of a critical thinker, yet constructed critical thinking as a means to the end of developing students as *global jinzai* (globally-minded human resources), rather than a valued educational goal in itself. Secondly, constructivist grounded theory (CGT) was used to analyse interviews with the instructors of EMI critical thinking courses. Guidelines for course design could be developed based on their description of effective pedagogical approaches, and institutional constraints that need to be overcome. Thirdly, data from the first two studies was used to construct a q-sort, the survey instrument used in Q-methodology. Two groups of students who had completed EMI critical thinking courses were surveyed on the attributes they considered essential to critical thinking. Factor analysis revealed four distinct views of critical thinking, and it was possible to discern that Japanese students placed most value in perspective taking, in comparison to international students who defined critical thinking in terms of logical argumentation. Combined, the findings of the three studies reveal a contested and conflicting concept that has developed particular connotations in the socio-cultural context, but which are particularly relevant to the growing demands for intercultural competence in Japanese higher education.

**Keywords:**

Critical thinking, internationalization of higher-education, Japanese universities, English medium instruction, inter-cultural communication.

論文審査の結果の要旨及び担当者

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論文審査の結果の要旨

**Title: Critical Thinking as Concept and Practice in the Internationalization Strategies of Japanese Universities**

In the context of the Japanese government’s prioritization of the internationalization of education, both at secondary and high education levels, attention has turned to pedagogies and curriculum that will enable children and young people to gain the necessary skills and outlook to be ‘international’ and function in the global economic arena. In this context critical thinking (批判的思考 orクリティカル・シンキング – in Japanese) has become a buzzword in the field of education. Through projects such as Super Global High School, The IB 200 Schools Project, Global 30 and Top Global University projects, to name a few, critical thinking (CT) has been highlighted as a key skill that Japanese young people need to acquire.

This research focuses on how the concept of CT has been framed in leading institutions in Japanese higher education, and how it is understood by those who teach it and the students who takes courses in it. In particular, the research aimed to understand ‘how conceptions of CT are actualized’ within higher education teaching and to shed light on how government statements about CT have been translated into practice on the ground by educators and how this, in turn, affects the ways that students understand and practice CT (p16). As such, this is an interesting and timely study.

The study was driven by five research questions:

- I. What is the impetus for MEXT’s interest in CT, and how has it been framed in its policies?
- II. How is the concept of CT framed by course administrators, and what role does it play in constructing the identity of undergraduate, EMI degree programs?
- III. How do instructors of English medium CT courses at Japanese universities, conceptualize CT and how is their understanding manifested in their teaching practices?
- IV. How do students taking EMI programs conceive and perceive the importance of being a critical thinker?
- V. To what extent are MEXT’s ambitions for promoting CT being achieved through EMI programs?

The first four questions were clearly addressed directly in the study, and question five was addressed indirectly through the different sub- studies.

The thesis includes two literature reviews. The first offers an extensive overview of the history of ideas around CT tracing them back to ancient Greek society and then following the development of ideas through the enlightenment, into modernist theories and then through to current ideas on CT as a curriculum subject. Through this endeavor, Adam Gyenes clarifies two traditions in CT, first a critical understanding of CT that is questioning of society and

authority, and conservative tradition that focuses on individual reflection and action. This well written overview provides a framework for exploring ideas circulating around CT in higher education in Japan. The second literary review chapter offers an overview of internationalization of education policy and debates in the Japanese context. These two review chapters are detailed and informative, and provide the backdrop for CT implementation in Japan.

The design of the research was well thought out and novel in many ways. It employed a qualitative, multi-method research design that investigated CT in Japanese higher education from three different angles. First, it explored ideas around CT by analyzing degree programme mission statements from six universities that fulfilled the study inclusion criteria. The search was done from websites of all the universities that were receiving Top Global University (TGU) funding (p131). The mission statements of all six undergraduate programmes that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) drawing on Fairclough's 'three boxes' framework for analysis of discursive events (see p133). While the number of statements analyzed was small, the analysis revealed similarities between how MEXT was framing CT and how the universities were articulating ideas. CT was being constructed as a means to an end; a means to create global *jinzai*. The mission statements also portrayed students as rather passive agents who had their CT skills 'nurtured' or 'fostered' into them. While too limited to make generalizations, the analysis was thorough and the results interesting.

The second phase focused on those teaching CT. Through a snowballing technique 17 instructors teaching CT at undergraduate level in the English medium at universities in Japan were recruited into the study. Participants were asked to create a mind map of their ideas about CT and this was used as a basis for discussion with each instructor. The data was analysed on the basis of constructivist grounded theory (see p166). Again, sample size was rather small, but the data is rich. It was clear that for those teaching CT it was an end – a habit of logically thinking and questioning. It was a skill that students would be able to use throughout their lives.

For the final phase, data was generated from student participants who had completed a CT course at one of two national universities. A q-sort method was used to present and analyse statements. Students were required to rank in terms of importance 32 statements describing CT taken from both the interviews and mission statements about CT (p247-248). This data allowed for comparison of how the two groups of students – one made of Japanese students largely educated in the mainstream Japanese system and the other Japanese and international students educated largely outside the mainstream Japanese school system. Both groups understood CT as pedagogy and that taught skills that were useful in life. However, the 'Japanese group' 'identified perspective taking and flexibility as paramount', whereas the 'international' student group thought of critical thinking in terms of logical analysis (p271). It is not clear the degree to which educational background generally rather than the influence of the way the CT courses were taught influence the results.

Given the emphasis now being placed on CT in Japanese education, this is an important study as it asks questions about the understandings and expectations of key stakeholders and provides rich and nuanced data to answer these questions. The thesis is of a very high standard and written with great clarity. The Committee were particularly impressed by the multi-method research design. We feel that this methodology itself makes a major contribution to the field and will be welcomed by those working in education and researching, implementing or teaching CT.