

An Alternative Model of International Joint Education in Northeast Asia

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Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed intensified cross-border student mobility and an increased number of international joint education initiatives in Asia. Focusing on a particular international joint education programme by six institutes in five universities in Northeast Asia, this study examines whether and how the programme contributed to cross-border student mobility. The students in the programme were interviewed about their motivations and experiences in the programme, from which four themes were identified: personal reasons, disciplinary interest, encouraging environment, and sustainable engagement. By discussing how the students' experiences in this programme differ from those offered by major international programmes in the region, this paper proposes that this programme could serve as an alternative international joint education programme model to facilitate international student mobility in Northeast Asia.

Keywords: international joint education; cross-border student mobility; higher education; Northeast Asia; the Tohoku Model

Introduction¹

Cross-border student mobility has experienced unprecedented expansion since the 1990s. Asia, in particular, is the main contributor to the international student growth (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2014), with students from Asia constituting 53% of international students enrolled worldwide (OECD, 2015). More specifically, nearly two-thirds of Asian international students were from East Asia as of 2003 (Brooks & Waters, 2011). While 'the dominant stream of cross-border student mobility is from less developed and newly-industrialised countries to western industrialised countries' (Li & Bray, 2007, p. 791), or more precisely, 'from Asia to ... Europe, North America and Oceania' (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 117), the destinations of Asian international students are changing and diversified. Having remained senders of students to

western countries, many Asian countries began developing strategies and initiatives to compete for international students, and as a result, 'a trend of regionalization or horizontal mobility of students within the region is emerging' (Chan, 2012, p. 207).

In the context of burgeoning international education initiatives and intensified cross-border student mobility within Asia, this paper zeros in on a particular international joint education programme (the Asia Education Leader Course, hereafter the AELC) operating in Northeast Asia. It is a sub-region in East Asia covering Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea, all of which are active players in the internationalisation of higher education and contributors to cross-border student mobility. More generally, it is a sub-region with strong internal connections and is increasingly taking a central stage in the global economic and political landscape; yet it is chronically plagued by political conflicts often fuelled by nationalism (Tan, 2015). According to the Genron NPO, an organisation led by progressive Japanese intellectuals which conducts regular public opinion surveys in the region, there are unfavourable impression, low trust, and lack of confidence about the future relation between these countries among ordinary citizens of Japan, China and South Korea (Kudo, 2015; The Genron NPO, 2016; The Genron NPO & East Asia Institute, 2016). Also, 'a burgeoning anti-Sinoism' is observed in Taiwan, especially among young people (Au, 2017). Bearing these social, economic and political contexts in mind, this study examines whether and how the AELC contributed to international student mobility in the sub-region by referring to existing major regional cross-border education initiatives and by investigating, through interviews, the motivations and experiences of students in the programme. The positive student experiences resulting from the relatively unique programme design suggest that the programme could serve as an alternative programme model of international joint education to facilitate cross-border student mobility in Northeast Asia.

In the following sections we shall review, first, the major initiatives for international student mobility currently in place in Asia, with reference to which the AELC is introduced, and second, the cross-border student motivations and experiences revealed in extant studies, with reference to which the findings of interviews with students in the programme are reported. The concluding section will draw upon the findings to encapsulate the characteristics of the AELC and propose it as 'the Tohoku Model' of international joint education.

Major international joint education initiatives in Northeast Asia

There are two main established initiatives running in the Northeast Asia region where the AELC is operating: the CAMPUS Asia (Collective Action for Mobility Programme of University Students in Asia) initiative and the UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific) platform. The CAMPUS Asia is an initiative launched by the three governments of Japan, China, and South

Korea in 2011. Compelled by the need to develop mutual understanding between the countries, the three governments lead and sponsor the CAMPUS Asia. It is tasked with developing joint programmes, each of which is required to be established under the consortium of universities from all the three countries (normally one university from one country). The initiative launched ten pilot joint programmes of either short term or double-degree in 2011, guaranteeing credit transfers or degree conferment and covering research areas from business to public policy, though none in the field of education or psychology. Based on the 'high achievements' of the pilot programmes, the initiative now has 17 'full-fledged' programmes since 2016 (NIAD-QE, n.d.). The initiative seems to have fulfilled its mission of promoting mutual understanding. For instance, Chun (2016) reported that student participants of the initiative experienced 'much positive change in terms of their Asian identity and affinity toward the country they have studied in', a change that is of 'significant difference' when compared with that experienced by regular exchange students (p. 290). However, it is also noted that the top-down approach followed by this politically driven initiative unavoidably renders it politically and financially vulnerable to the volatile diplomatic relations and public sentiments among the three countries (Chun, 2016).

Similar to the CAMPUS Asia, the UMAP is government-initiated and charged with the mission of developing international understanding through mobility, but the UMAP has a longer history (launched in 1993) and is membered by a much longer list of countries/territories (35 as of October 2017, including Taiwan as well as the three countries in the CAMPUS Asia). The UMAP platform supports universities in member countries/territories to develop student exchange programmes in a variety of forms, from bilateral to multilateral and from week-long to semester-long. It has credit transfer (but no degree conferment) regulations and tuition waiver policies in place to facilitate student mobility. While no empirical reports on the UMAP have been found, the initiative seems to be flexible in terms of programme form and destination for studying abroad to meet the students' needs.

The Asia Education Leader Course (AELC)

Launched in 2014, the cross-border education programme in question was proposed and, at the time of writing, is coordinated by Graduate School of Education at Tohoku University in Japan and jointly operated by a total of six partner faculty-level institutes in the disciplines of education and psychology in five universities across Northeast Asia.²

Built upon this multilateral partnership, the programme aims to foster future education researchers, teacher leaders, and education administrators, featuring the rotation of summer/winter courses and the curriculum under an overarching framework (Chen & Shimizu, 2017). Specifically, the AELC is carried out through two-week summer/winter courses hosted in

rotation by partner institutes. The summer/winter courses are currently open only to graduate-level students of the partners, each of which has a quota of five students having their tuition fee waived. This ensures that all student participants are from similar academic backgrounds and that each AELC class has the appropriate size for teamwork and discussion. At present the programme follows a curriculum framework known as 'the rainbow curriculum', which contains four components – knowledge (professional knowledge in education), attitude (empathetic attitude toward Asia), skill (research skills), and practice (experience in the field). With practice as the common component on the basis, the other three components construct three subject clusters (knowledge-practice, attitude-practice & skill-practice), corresponding to which each summer/winter course opens three subjects with specific topics, objectives, contents, and assessment at the discretion of the host institute. As a non-degree programme with credit transfer possibility at the discretion of individual institutes, the AELC awards a joint certificate of completion, signed by the heads of all six partner institutes, to students who successfully earn twelve credits (each AELC subject normally carries two credits), of which at least two are from each cluster and at least half of the credits are earned from summer/winter courses not hosted by the home institute. This means that in order to be awarded the joint certificate of completion, a student is required to participate – with control over when and which subject – in more than one summer/winter course and to stay, at least once, for about two weeks at a partner university.

Some distinctions and similarities between the AELC on the one hand and the CAMPUS Asia and the UMAP on the other hand can be identified at this point. In contrast to the government-initiated latter two which oversee multiple programmes and enable a much larger scale of university and student involvement and financial support, the AELC is a ground-level programme which is fully initiated, coordinated, operated, and funded by six faculty-level institutes in Northeast Asian universities.

Nevertheless, given its scope and the involvement of institutes across the sub-region, the AELC corresponds to the missions of the CAMPUS Asia and the UMAP and the multilateral partnerships between Northeast Asian higher education institutions required or enabled by them.

Student motivations and experiences in cross-border education

There are two driving forces behind the ongoing internationalization of higher education. One is governmental and/or institutional ambitions of educational internationalization, illustrated by the two major initiatives in Northeast Asia and the AELC in question. The other is students' demands for overseas education. While the motivations and experiences of students in cross-border education, according to Li and Bray (2007), have not received 'as much attention ... as might be desired' (p. 792), there has been increased research taking up the subjective viewpoint

of international students, which constitutes one of the two broad categories in the literature on international student mobility (Kell & Vogl, 2008), the other being research on objective mobility trends and flows. However, this category of research, as pointed out by Kell and Vogl (2008), often 'sees students as isolated individuals and as passive participants in a global market setting, and does not assign students any capacity for agency' (p. viii). Perhaps this explains the growing attention being paid in the literature to the personal or private factors, in addition to the more sophisticatedly elaborated societal or public factors, in the decision of studying abroad.

Kondakci (2011) noticed that the literature recognizes the distinction between individual and societal rationales behind cross-border mobility, which he called the 'private-public factors distinction' (p. 575). One of the main theories explaining the public factors in students' decision of studying abroad is the push-pull theory used by Altbach (2004), in which the push factors refer to the negative factors in the home societies and the pull factors to the positive factors in the host societies. With reference to existing research, Li and Bray (2007) complemented that there are also 'reverse push-pull factors', which mean negative forces that 'repel foreign students' in host societies and 'positive forces that encourage students to stay at home' (p. 795). Reverse or not, the push and pull factors, as Li and Bray (2007) sharply pointed out, are in effect 'external forces'. They possibly impact students' individual behaviours and choices but such possibility is up to students' personal characteristics such as 'socio-economic status, academic ability, gender, age, motivation, and aspiration' (pp. 793-794). These personal choices and characteristics are in effect what Kondakci (2011) called 'private factors'. In addition, drawing upon migration research, Kondakci (2011) added a temporal dimension with the pre-departure and post-departure factors, the former referring to students' rationales for initiating the plan of studying abroad and the latter to rationales for sustaining it.

Studies have revealed the struggle of students who crossed the border of two Asian societies having unfavourable public sentiments for each other. Because of economic and social vulnerabilities in the host society, the Chinese students living in Tokyo in the anthropological study of Coates (2015) resorted to being 'unseen', instead of being recognized, by 'confining their everyday practices to small, "hidden" spaces' (p. 146). For such students in Japan, as reported by Lai (2015), being reflexive towards their Chinese national identity and engaging with local Japanese people on controversial political issues, or otherwise deliberately avoiding them, were their ways of coping with the negative political and social relations between the home and host societies. Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong provide another case of uneasy border-crossing experience. This group of students reportedly have to contest and resist against the negative stereotypes about them in the host society (Xu, 2015a) and look for and draw upon group advantages such as spatial mobility, ideological openness, and capability in global

competition to justify their decision to study in Hong Kong and defend themselves from the unfavourable social climate (Xu, 2015b). What about the motivations and experiences of students in the AELC programme who belonged to four Asian societies not free from socio-political conflicts between each other? To investigate this question, we interviewed the AELC students.

Data

A qualitative research method was employed to obtain concrete and detailed descriptions from students enrolled in this cross-border joint education programme. Among the 60 students registered in the programme (as of September 2016), we invited, based on availability and experience of participation in at least one AELC summer/winter course, and successfully interviewed a total of 17 students on a voluntary basis. These interviews were in the form of either one-to-one or group interview of about one hour each and were conducted between September and December 2016. While the authors were involved in the AELC as instructors and coordinators, we clearly mentioned at the outset of each interview that the study was independent from and had no impact on evaluation of the students in the programme. All interviews were conducted in the interviewees' first language.

Table 1 Interviewee information

No	Home university	Gender	Academic field	AELC experience (host university)
1	TU	F	education	KU, NTNU
2		F	psychology	NTNU
3		F	psychology	NTNU
4		F	education	NNU, KU
5		M	education	NNU, KU
6	NNU	F	education	NNU
7		F	education	NNU
8		M	psychology	NNU
9		F	psychology	NNU, NTNU
10		F	education	NNU, NTNU
11	NCCU	F	education	TU
12		M	education	KU
13		F	education	KU
14		F	education	KU
15		F	education	TU, NCCU
16		F	education	TU, NCCU
17		F	psychology	TU, NCCU

Note: TU = Tohoku University (Sendai, Japan); NNU = Nanjing Normal University (Nanjing, China); NCCU = National Chengchi University (Taipei, Taiwan); KU = Korea University (Seoul, South Korea); NTNU = National Taiwan Normal University (Taipei, Taiwan)

The interviewees were composed of students from three universities located in different East Asian societies (Table 1). This guaranteed the involvement of a wide range of student perspectives across the East Asian region in this study, though limitation still exists as we were unable to reach the AELC students from South Korea, partly due to a relatively low number of Korea University students participating in this programme. During the interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner, we asked the following primary questions:

- What motivated you to join the AELC?
- Why did you participate this summer/winter course?
- What do you think distinguishes the AELC from other overseas study programmes?
- How was your experience in individual summer/winter courses?
- Which experience in the AELC do you now value most?
- Do you think the AELC experience is helpful for your future career development and why?
- What is your suggestion for a better AELC?

With the interview data transcribed verbatim, the authors first analysed individually and then discussed together to code, categorise, and synthesise topics before identifying themes originating from the data.

Findings: four themes

Four themes emerged from the students' descriptions and reflections of their motivations and experiences in the AELC programme. They are personal reasons, disciplinary interest, encouraging environment, and sustainable engagement.

(1) Personal reasons

It is found that there were several factors that affected students' decision to participate, and equally revealingly, not to participate in the programme's summer/winter courses. The students frequently referred to their interest in certain subject topics as reason for participation, while they cited the course timings, typically when it clashed with their regular school calendar, as a reason for non-participation. Some students also referred to the lack of financial support as a reason for non-attendance. For one student (No. 6), it was her previous study experience in a country that made the winter course held in that country less attractive to her than other summer/winter courses. For the students, the factors affecting their choice between summer/winter courses and, accordingly, between host societies were primarily personal (such as

disciplinary interest and prior experience) and practical (such as time and financial concern). There was no report of the choice being influenced or altered by the consideration of the socio-political and economic circumstances in the host society despite the sensitive and volatile political relations and public sentiments among the four Asian societies involved in the programme. In other words, the students' cross-border participation in this programme seemed to depend primarily upon private factors rather than macro public factors. This is not hard to understand, given that the summer/winter courses were only two weeks long in neighbouring societies, so the AELC students could continue or withdraw from the cross-border participation more easily and thus might consider the 'external forces' in both home and host societies (Li & Bray, 2007) less seriously than long-term cross-continent overseas students in particular. This finding confirms the need to take into account factors besides public ones in international student mobility. It also complements that time span, which is often presupposed to be long-term in extant studies (Coates, 2015; Lai, 2015; Xu, 2015a, 2015b), could impact the motivation and experience of students in a host society that has unfavourable sentiments towards home society.

(2) Disciplinary interest

As mentioned above, a primary reason for students' participation in the programme was their disciplinary interest in the subjects offered in the AELC's summer/winter courses. Indeed, many students explained their choice of the AELC by distinguishing it from other short-term international study programmes, pointing out that unlike the latter which tends to focus on language and cultural experience, the former had its clear disciplinary orientation in the fields of education and psychology and brought together peers with similar disciplinary interest from across four societies in the region. When asked what they valued most in their AELC experience, quite a few students referred to the field trips to local educational institutions and facilities, which formed an integral part of the practice-based clusters in the programme curriculum. A student explained that:

The knowledge part [in the AELC] was important. What was more [important for me] was the networking [of peers in the field of education in the region made available by the programme] ... Also, it was good to have opportunities to visit local educational institutions which would not be accessible for me if I were not a participant of this programme. (No. 5)

The extract illustrates that the programme's clear disciplinary focus provided the student with valued experience of not only disciplinary learning inside and outside of classes but also networking with international peers having similar academic interests.

In the absence of societal or public influence, disciplinary interest is found to be the primary private factor in the students' decision to choose and participate in the AELC. If disciplinary interest is considered as a 'pre-departure factor' (Kondakci, 2011), then the valued learning experience can be seen as a 'post-departure factor', which sustained students' participation in the summer/winter courses following the programme.

(3) Encouraging environment

The student interviewees were given a chance to reflect on their experience in the AELC classes, which was found to be encouraged by two environmental settings: the use of English as the medium of instruction and the involvement, in virtually every class, of participants from diverse societies. In the explanations about their interest in a subject topic as a motivation for participation, some students mentioned that the English-medium instruction was also an attractive point for them as they had little or no prior opportunity or experience to learn their subjects of interest in English. Furthermore, the interview data also suggested that in the English-medium AELC classes, the fact that neither students nor instructors were native English speakers was not necessarily a negative factor. On the contrary, it could function positively to create a favourable communication and learning environment which relieved participants from the anxiety of making language errors. One student clearly expressed this point:

I think [I got better at speaking English in such a setting]. I would think that all are at a similar [language] level ... and as the participants would not speak as quickly as native speakers do, I could understand what others said and give my response. This encouraged me to speak and practice [English]. (No. 14)

For another student, it was the confident attitude of one instructor whose first language was not English that gave her encouragement to express herself and communicate in English in class. She described her positive experience in this way:

What impressed me in that class was not the contents of the subject but the instructor. His English was not very good and required listener to pay great attention to catch his words. ... He, however, spoke loudly and confidently to try to send out his message. ... And it was amazing that I could catch what he wanted to say! That's the most important thing I learnt in that class. ... If you have something to say, it is just fine to speak in a loud and confident way [despite the language barrier], isn't it? (No. 3)

The setting of non-native English speakers participating in English-medium class, however, might still have a downside of discouraging classroom communication, not because of non-nativeness but due to the presence of some non-native speakers fluent in English. For instance, following the comment quoted above, another student added that:

[In that winter course] there were some students who were very good at English ... and the thought that though all of us were from Asia, those students speak English so well, deterred me from speaking. (No. 12)

The use of English language is often considered as a key factor in the flow of international students from non-English to English speaking countries; and non-English speaking countries, including those in Asia, have increasingly developed English-medium education programmes as a part of effort to counter this flow (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Marginson, 2006; Phan, 2013). The dominance of English language in the internationalization of education has drawn research attention and ideological concerns. Park and Bae (2009) observed that in the case of South Korean educational migration to Singapore, there are 'language ideologies' that proficiency in English entails social and economic benefits; concerning the surge in number of English-medium programmes promoted by governments in Asian higher education, Phan (2013) argued that the use of English language is a strategy adopted by such nations to shape national cultural identity in their interests.

Notwithstanding such concerns, the current findings show that the English-medium learning experience by non-native English speakers in non-English speaking societies could facilitate peer engagement by encouraging self-expression and self-confidence, which are arguably important attributes required in the face of control, submission and subjection. Again, if the interest in learning in English is a pre-departure factor that might fall into the trap of 'language ideologies', then students' experiences in this particular English-medium setting, either positive or negative, can be seen as a post-departure factor behind their participation in the cross-border education programme.

The other aspect highlighted and valued by the students in their reflections of the AELC experience was the involvement and influence of participants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. For instance,

What I valued most is the group study or discussion in class which gave me a chance to build a close friendship with peers from other countries ... and to know how students of different universities studied and did research. (No. 12)

In a small investigation required by a class, the idea of those students [from another university] was very creative ... which I think we [from the same university] could not come up with ... as we tended to pick up a traditional and formal topic for research but their topic was close to daily life and amusing. (No. 7)

She [a student from another university] not only looked after us like an elder sister, but also set an example to us by taking notes and photos in the field trip, which tended to be just about walking and looking around for us. I think I should learn more from my peers. ... You could learn a lot from your peers ... because students from different places are indeed different. (No. 6)

The students' reflections above relate to the second theme of disciplinary interest by illustrating that the interaction between peers in the AELC classes seemed to be stimulated by the dynamics between similar disciplinary interests and diverse sociocultural backgrounds among participants. In short, it appears that the English-medium and multicultural environment are positive external factors contributing to the participation and mobility of students in this international programme.

(4) Sustainable engagement

The fourth and final theme identified in the students' descriptions and reflections of their AELC motivations and valued experiences was sustainability in three aspects: money and time, curriculum, and peer network. First, while lack of financial support and schedule clash were cited by some students as reasons for their non-participation in some summer/winter courses, the interviewees pointed out the efficiency in terms of money and time of joining such short-term and region-based international programme to gain the experience of studying abroad. For instance,

Being an exchange student or studying abroad is often a long-term endeavour with high cost. But this [AELC] is relatively intensive, which allows us to experience the life of studying abroad in an economical and short-term way, from the instruction style and the communication with peers in class to the shopping, laundering, and cooking after class. (No. 12)

This suggests that the relatively low cost of time and money, compared with full-time degree programmes in societies with high living costs, provides leverage to the programme in attracting students interested in studying abroad. This arguably enhances the sustainability of the programme, in terms of student enrolment, during high demands for cross-border education from

East Asian students.

Second, given that disciplinary interest is a driving factor for participation in the programme, how to select and design subject topics that can catch students' diverse interests in the fields of education and psychology and how to coordinate the varying and changing capacities and resources of the partner institutes are questions that directly impact the programme's sustainability. It can be argued that the AELC effectively responded to these questions through its curriculum containing four components at the core and three subject clusters as the form while leaving the decision of specific subject topics, contents and assessment at the discretion of individual partner institutes. There in fact have been internal arguments that as a part of quality assurance, there should be stricter regulations to strengthen the integration and coherence of contents, pedagogy and evaluation among the subjects of summer/winter courses. However, the students' experiences in this study suggest that in order to meet students' academic interests and thus sustain the attractiveness of the programme, it is realistic and practicable to allow a certain degree of flexibility in curriculum of international programmes, particularly in those of multilateral partnership like the AELC, at a time of rapid changes in higher education in the region.

The third aspect of sustainability, as noted above, was the opportunity for students to build and develop peer network through participation in more than one summer/winter course required by the programme curriculum. The interviewees were often excited to share how they kept in touch with each other and talked over which subjects to attend together in following summer/winter courses, and even stories of their leisure trips to each other's cities. Although the students commonly had no idea about the benefit that the joint certificate of completion would bring to them in the labour market, some did believe that the peer network would be helpful in their future professional career. One student envisioned this as:

For people like me who aim to be a teacher after graduation [which is common among the AELC students], ... what such a network could provide is that, for example, when we design our teaching methods, we can contact and cooperate with each other, or even connect our classrooms via Skype to teach together. (No. 5)

Peer networking seemed to act as a post-departure public factor for students to join this cross-border programme, given that it was not mentioned by the students as a motivation for but was reflected as a valued outcome of the participation in the programme. Indeed, networking has been listed by Kondakci (2011) as a post-departure public rationale influencing the destination for studying abroad. Moreover, he highlights the role of networking in his discussion of international

migration through overseas education. The current findings complement this by indicating that the benefit of networking through international student mobility can also be perceived in light of future professional career.

This section has reported, explained and illustrated the four themes identified in the AELC students' motivations and experiences in the programme. As a personal and practical decision uninfluenced by macro public factors in host or home societies, the student mobility in the programme seemed to be driven primarily by disciplinary interest and the programme was valued due to the use of English as the medium of instruction and a diverse class composition which created an encouraging and engaging environment. Also, it was found that the student mobility in the programme was sustained by three aspects: the low cost of time and money, the flexibility in curriculum for partner institutes to meet students' disciplinary interests, and the opportunity for students to develop and sustain peer network through the programme. Based on the motivations and experiences of students, the concluding section will discuss the distinction between the AELC and other major international education programmes in Northeast Asia, and propose that the AELC could serve as an alternative programme model to facilitate international student mobility in the sub-region.

Concluding discussion: the AELC as an alternative model of international joint education in Northeast Asia

This study found that students were attracted to the AELC and valued the cross-border study experience first and foremost because of the disciplinary focus of the programme, which enabled them to choose and learn their subjects of interest in English and to develop and maintain their network with international peers from similar academic fields at a relatively low cost of time and money. These findings suggest that there is a need for such overseas study experience among Northeast Asian students.

It can be discussed that the capability of the AELC to provide such experience lies in its four features. First, the multilateral partnership of the programme allows it to not only bring together students from similar academic fields across East Asian societies, but also offer various subject topics with field study in different societies. Second and relatedly, the AELC provides a shared and overarching four-component curriculum framework under which each partner institute has room to tailor the arrangements, including subject contents, of the summer/winter course it hosts according to its capacity and resources. Third, the AELC is comprised of two-week long summer/winter courses in neighbouring societies; the short time period and geographical distance seem to be able to minimize the impact of negative macro societal influences in home and host societies on students' decision to participate in the programme, as

such influences were not found in this study. Fourth, the AELC is fully initiated, coordinated, operated, and funded by partner faculty-level institutes in universities in the East Asian region. Such autonomy enables it to provide a buttress against the volatile political relations and public sentiments among the East Asian societies where these institutes are located.

The overseas study experience valued by the interviewed students and provided by the AELC is arguably different from what the major established international programmes in the region offers. Similar to the AELC, the programmes of the CAMPUS Asia feature multilateral partnership and disciplinary focus, but because the CAMPUS Asia is a government-led initiative financially supported by three member governments, its programmes are subject to the unstable political relations and thus are financially and administratively unsustainable in offering relevant student experience. Although the UMAP programmes support multilateral partnership, it as a student exchange platform does not guarantee that its programmes have a clear programme vision with disciplinary focus to cater to the student needs found in this study. Furthermore, both the CAMPUS Asia and the UMAP follow a top-down approach in which the programmes under them are subject to rules and regulations made by the higher authorities at the top, which limit the room for partner institutes at the bottom to initiatively improve programme design and implementation according to changing institutional capacities and resources.

The AELC is not merely strong at areas where the CAMPUS Asia and the UMAP are weak; it also contributes to what the latter two aim for: promoting mutual engagement and understanding in the region. Thanks to the multilateral partnership of the AELC, the involvement of peers from Japan, China, South Korea, and Taiwan is indeed found to be an attractive point for students and stimulates their engagement with each other in the programme. Furthermore, a separate study shows that the AELC can provide important learning resources and opportunities for developing the awareness of Asia as a community (Chen, 2017), though empirical study needs to be done to examine whether student acceptance of the Asian identity is increased after programmes like the CAMPUS Asia (Chun, 2016).

More generally, as opposed to the AELC, long-term cross-border educational programmes often require students to invest much more time and money for overseas study experience, whilst most, if not all, existing short-term international programmes in the region occur one time without providing opportunity for the students to re-join each other. In other words, existing short- and long-term programme models cannot satisfy the found needs of students to study abroad and build sustainable peer network while keeping a low cost of time and money.

The uniqueness of the student experience and needs found in this study suggests that the AELC could serve as an alternative cross-border education programme model at least in Northeast Asia. We name it 'the Tohoku Model' after Tohoku University, whose Graduate School

of Education proposed the programme. The key characteristics of this model can be encapsulated as follows:

- Multilateral partnership fully initiated, coordinated, operated, and funded by regional faculty-level institutes in the same or neighbouring academic fields;
- A clear programme vision with a sharp disciplinary focus and shared curriculum framework to ensure a certain degree of coherence, but allowing sufficient room for partners to optimize their respective varying and changing capacities and resources; and
- Two-week long English-medium summer/winter courses hosted by partner institutes in rotation under a curriculum that requires the students to participate more than once for a certificate of completion not leading up to a degree.

This model of international joint education programme is arguably practicable for all disciplines and various kinds of universities interested in facilitating cross-border student mobility. Compared with degree programme or university-level partnership, it is relatively easy to start, coordinate, operate, and to secure academic and financial resources, given that the summer/winter courses are separately funded and hosted by individual partners.

However, the AELC in its current form is not without room for improvement. For instance, like the UMAP, it can set up a credit transfer scheme for better quality assurance, provided that partner institutes are able to organize the summer/winter courses they host according to the respective conditions. Also, given that promoting mutual understanding among East Asian societies is an intention behind the programme and is indeed a part of its curriculum framework, it may be helpful to create opportunities for students to learn the languages used in the region so as to better understand the local community during field study, while at the same time keeping the attractive English-medium feature of the classes intact. Nevertheless, the finding that the AELC can provide a unique overseas study experience valued by students suggests that it could serve as an alternative programme model to facilitate international student mobility in East Asia, a region of political instability yet of critical importance to the intensified internationalization and regionalization of higher education.

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Notes

- 1 This study was performed when the first author was affiliated with the Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University.
- 2 The other five partner institutes are the College of Education in National Chengchi University and the College of Education in National Taiwan Normal University in Taiwan, the School of Education Science and the School of Psychology in Nanjing Normal University in China, and the Department of Education in Korea University in South Korea. More information about the AELC can be found at <http://www2.sed.tohoku.ac.jp/~aelc/>.

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