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50 Years of the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program: Assessing the Long-term Impact Through Alumni Association Activity

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Research Note

50 Years of the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program: Assessing the Long-term Impact Through Alumni Association Activity

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Abstract

This research note uses a comparative analysis of two alumni association publications to assess the long-term impact of participation in the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program. It uses assessment criteria of portability, dependability and sustainability for evaluating learning outcomes developed by Naomi Miyake and adapts it to the context of this exchange program that has run almost continuously since 1971. The analysis of articles and features in the publications reveals that interests and activities of alumni reflect the fulfillment of the three criteria, but with some important differences that likely correlate to the different goals of the program on the Mexican and Japanese sides. This research note suggests a simple comparative methodology that can be used to assess the impact of participation in the absence of other assessment tools.

1. Background of the Program and Research Framework

The Japan-Mexico Exchange Program began in 1971 at the instigation of the Mexican president Luis Echeverría, with the active cooperation and promotion of the First Secretary of the Embassy of Japan in Mexico, Hayashiya Eikichi. By 2018, the program had sent approximately 4 700 young Mexicans and Japanese to the counterpart country for education and training (Kono 2018), a number that is likely closer to 4 900 at the time of writing (2021). As an example of cultural diplomacy and expression of soft power (Nye 1990), this bilateral program has proved to be long-lasting and resilient. Since 2018, a research project led by Kyoko Tanaka of Nagoya University in which the author is a co-researcher has been examining the long-term results for participants in both countries using the rubric developed by Miyake (2009) of portability, dependability and sustainability. While Miyake's rubric was originally intended to measure learning outcomes and has been adopted by other educators for measuring the effectiveness of curriculum (Saito and Shirouzu 2016), our research team has adapted Miyake's rubric to assess the effectiveness of the program over the long term. While other forms of data collection are being employed for the broader study, this research note measures impact through a comparative analysis of the interests and priorities of alumni as expressed through text media, in

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this case the respective newsletters of the alumni organizations in both countries. These materials are used as evidence in the absence of other bases for comparison between alumni of the different countries. This comparative method was selected due to its usefulness in exploring similarities and differences of a shared phenomenon (Azarian 2011), in this case the experience of participation in the program. While the project will use data from a questionnaire collected from a comparable sample of Japanese and Mexican alumni and interviews, at present only the questionnaire for the Japanese alumni has been completed. Because of this, the association newsletters were selected as a proxy to provide the research team an initial basis for partially assessing the impacts of participation in the exchange program. A multiple database search for comparable studies in English, Japanese and Spanish revealed that this method of assessing and comparing alumni association activity using newsletters as evidence has not previously been used, at least not in languages the author can access. To the extent that newsletters have been used as evidence in previous research, such use has often been confined to the value and accuracy of investment newsletters to clients rather than as evidence of areas of organizational interest and focus (Jaffe and Mahoney 1999). However, in the case of this research, comparing the content of articles and recurring features in the two publications reveals that organizational interests and priorities reflect the different composition of the alumni bodies, the presence or absence of support from an official organ of the host country, and point to the fulfillment of Miyake's bases of evaluation in several important respects.

2. Assessments of Effectiveness in the Literature

The significant growth in the number of exchange programs in recent decades has produced a body of literature that examines the effects of participation in a variety of ways. Sending institutions often conduct questionnaires pre-departure and soon after return to gauge program effectiveness such as fulfillment of expectations (United States General Accounting Office 2004). Exchange programs as connections between universities and research bodies as part of a globalized knowledge economy have received academic attention as well (Al-Youbi, Zahed and Tierney 2020), and the role of such programs in international relations has been explored for decades (Mulcahy 1999; Cull 2008; Scott-Smith 2008). In contrast to these studies, our research team focuses on the long-term effects on the career trajectories and subjective personal growth of program participants over a 50-year span using the portability, dependability and sustainability of the experience as evaluation criteria. The strength of Miyake's rubric is that it allows us to gauge short, medium and long-term effects of participation to assess the effectiveness of the program at the individual and national levels. While other research takes a similar approach to ours in gauging the personal long-term effects of participation on individuals rather than institutions or diplomatic relations (Asada 2020), the associational activity of alumni of such programs has not been explored elsewhere despite its relevance to measuring how participation

continues to shape lives. This research note addresses this gap and outlines a comparative method for analyzing alumni activity through newsletters to measure the effects of participation in the program.

3. Origins of the Exchange Program

The motivations and planning for the exchange program were recounted by Hayashiya Eikichi in the third edition of one of the newsletters examined in this report (Águila y Sol 1996: 2-6). According to the testimony, the initiative for the program came from President Echeverría, who wanted to deepen relations between the two countries and identified exchange of human resources as one of the pillars of this plan. Echeverría envisioned sending young Mexican technicians and scientists to apprentice in Japanese companies and bring back the expertise they gained to contribute to the industrial development of Mexico, while welcoming Japanese students and early career professionals to learn about Latin America and the Spanish language while living with Mexican families. Echeverría hoped to send and receive 300 people annually to start and quickly increase the number to 500, which Hayashiya informed him would be impossible, given the logistical problems of finding host institutions and companies for the Mexican participants. After a quick succession of consultations with the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in Mexico and authorities in Tokyo, Hayashiya informed the president that Japan would join in the program but that the number of participants should be limited to 100. From Japan, university students (both undergraduate and graduate) and young professionals recommended by their schools or companies are approved through a screening process and sent for up to a year, supported by the Mexican National Council of Science and Technology (abbreviated as CONACYT) with the objective of deepening understanding of Mexico in particular and Latin America in general, and an emphasis on language, history, economy, politics and culture. In our questionnaire sample of 122 Japanese alumni, 51.6% were undergraduate or graduate students when they took part in the program, while 44.3% were already working, and 4.1% had other occupational status. The Japanese participants often live with Mexican families (over 63% of our Japanese alumni respondents did homestay for at least a part of their time in Mexico) and are placed in prestigious universities throughout the country, though a majority of our respondents resided in Mexico City (54.9%) and fully 41% did their studies at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the largest national university whose main campus is in Mexico City. On the Japanese side, Mexicans with backgrounds in technical research and practice are supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and need to pass a screening process similar to their Japanese counterparts. They are placed in companies or university research bodies to learn technical skills to be applied upon return to Mexico. Unlike their Japanese counterparts, the Mexican participants do not stay with Japanese families but rather in dormitories or apartments. As our questionnaire for the Mexican alumni is not yet complete, we do not have comparative data about the occupational status of the alumni at the time of participation, nor detailed information about where

they studied during their time in Japan. As a general observation, the goals of the two participating countries were somewhat different from the beginning, with Mexicans going to Japan primarily to gain technical knowledge to apply to Mexico's development, while the Japanese participants were to gain a deep understanding of Mexico and Latin America. In other words, the prospective gains for Mexicans have been primarily defined by socio-economic utility, while those for Japanese are more cultural and academic in nature. This tendency has continued to guide the objectives of the exchange program, and can be clearly observed in the interests and concerns seen in the alumni associations' publications.

4. The Exchange Program Alumni Associations and Their Publications

Japanese and Mexican alumni of the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program have formal organizations which they can join voluntarily: *Nichiboku Kouryukai* (日墨交流会) for Japanese and *la Asociación de Exbecarios de México en Japón* (ASEMEJA) for Mexicans. 20 editions of the *Águila y Sol* newsletter of Nichiboku Kouryukai and five of ASEMEJA's *Tsuru* were analyzed in order to get an idea of the interests and priorities of alumni who participated in the exchange program. *Águila y Sol* has been published continuously since 1995. The newsletters examined cover 1995 to 2003 (editions 1 to 14), 2011 (edition 27), 2013–2015 (editions 30, 33, and 35), 2018 (edition 38) and 2020 (edition 39). ASEMEJA was established in 1978, but based on information from its website (asemeja.org), *Tsuru* has been published since 1995. The print versions of *Tsuru* from 2010, 2011, 2014 and 2016 were analyzed, and the 2020 edition was reviewed online. The titles and content of the articles and features for each publication were listed and organized to identify common themes that would indicate the priorities of the alumni organizations and the kinds of events in which they have been involved. Frequency of theme and content was used as an indicator of organizational focus that can in turn be used to assess the long-term impact of the exchange for the alumni.

From the 2010 to at least the 2016 edition of *Tsuru*, the publication featured four consistent categories of coverage: *desarrollo industrial* (industrial development), *seguridad humana* (human security), *medio ambiente* (environment), and *cooperación sur-sur* (South-South cooperation). The 2020 edition included new categories: *formación de recursos humanos* (human resource training), *cultura y humanismo* (culture and humanism) and *desarrollo tecnológico* (technological development), and did not include *medio ambiente* or *seguridad humana*. Editions of *Tsuru* prior to 2010 were not available for thorough analysis but the covers available for viewing on the ASEMEJA website reveal space was often given to interviews with Japanese embassy representatives or JICA officials prior to 2010. The themes featured in *Tsuru* likely reflect two important facts: one, that ASEMEJA has a strong and continuous relationship with JICA in Mexico, which helps fund the organization, and therefore focuses strongly on issues related to development; and two, that Mexicans who participate in the program are not traditional academic exchange students, but rather researchers and technicians whose primary

experience in Japan involves some form of technical training that Japanese companies and institutions provide. While *Tsuru* does also cover aspects of Japanese culture and cultural exchange between Mexico and Japan, this concern appears secondary to the application of knowledge and skills gained through the program to the development of Mexico and other developing nations, as is reflected in thematic categories such as desarrollo industrial and cooperación sur-sur. The limited number of editions reviewed also feature reports based on conferences and symposia where Mexican alumni of the program presented scientific and technical research regarding development-related topics from climate change and disaster prevention to agricultural issues in other Latin American countries. In short, *Tsuru* seems very much a forum for professionals who participated in the exchange program to communicate about the actions they are taking to implement the knowledge and aptitudes they gained or had enhanced through their experience in Japan. ASEMEJA describes its own mission as “to share Japanese culture and technology with the population of Mexico” (Tsuru 2016: 17) through three axes: improving the environment and health, improving productivity, and fostering love for culture and the arts. In this mission statement, the prioritization of development issues in the association can be clearly seen.

In contrast, the interests and priorities expressed through *Águila y Sol* are much more diverse. This impression is partly due to the fact that many more editions were available for analysis, and therefore the possibility of the asymmetry problem associated with comparative analysis must be noted (Azarian 2011). However, even controlling for that factor, a simple listing of the contents of the 20 issues reviewed (provided in Appendix A) and an attempt to group repeating features shows that *Águila y Sol* has not maintained a consistent thematic focus over the years analogous to that of *Tsuru*. The only major features that have remained relatively consistent since 1995 are reports from Mexico by current program participants (メキシコだより or 留学生だより, appearing in 12 of the 20 editions reviewed) and reports regarding the annual Mexico Seminar held in Japan (メキシコセミナー, appearing in eight out of 20). The only other feature which appears frequently is the Editor’s Note (編集後記, 14 editions), though this is a technical aspect of the publication rather than a thematic feature. The analysis shows that some themes or series appear at different moments in *Águila y Sol* but later disappear. For example, several early editions (1, 2 and 5) had a gourmet guide for readers (グルメ情報) that did not continue, and editions 8 through 13 featured information about Mexico-related literature in the hands of alumni (派遣生OBの手になるメキシコ関連の文献), another topic that did not continue into later editions. Compared to its ASEMEJA counterpart publication, *Águila y Sol* provides more information about cultural events relating to Mexico taking place in Japan and relies more on testimonials from current or former program participants. This could be because the profile of Japanese participants in the program is more diverse than the Mexicans who come to Japan on the program, as from the Japanese side both students and company employees are sent. Rather than an emphasis on training, Japanese participants receive a broader introduction to Mexican history,

culture and society, as well as education in Spanish. This more socio-cultural emphasis seems to be reflected in the articles published in *Águila y Sol* and may relate to the fact that one of the main goals of sending Japanese young people to Mexico since the program's inception has been to expand knowledge and understanding of Mexico. It may also relate to the fact that Nichiboku Kouryukai does not seem to have a comparable relationship with a single Mexican institution the way ASEMEJA has with JICA that would influence the content of the newsletter, although several early editions (8, 12 and 13) had articles with content relating to Mexican embassy staff who had interaction with the alumni community, in particular the cultural attache (メキシコ大使館文化担当). Early editions also had reports from representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (外務省だより, editions 1, 4, 6, 8), which can perhaps be linked to the fact that a major reason for Japanese participation was to improve understanding of and relations with the countries of Latin America, especially Mexico. As such, the involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the alumni association was considered important, at least in some moments. However, neither the Mexican embassy nor Ministry of Foreign Affairs appear to have a deep connection to, and influence on, the priorities and activities of Nichiboku Kouryukai. The activities and interests of program alumni are thus more diverse and changeable over time than their Mexican counterparts, and less related to official organs of either the Japanese or Mexican government.

While there are notable differences in the focus of the two organization's publications, there are also some points of similarity. Both over their history of publication have featured stories relating to the culture of the other country, and events that promote knowledge and appreciation of the partner country's customs, traditions and cultural production. While this aspect is more notable with Nichiboku Kouryukai, *Tsuru* also includes a section called *arte* or *arte y cultura*, showing that ASEMEJA does not ignore the deeper appreciation of Japanese culture brought back by alumni. Another similarity is that both associations commemorate important anniversaries of the exchange program or other aspects of Japanese-Mexican relations: features on the 100th anniversary of Japanese migration to Mexico are featured in 1997 and 1998 editions of *Águila y Sol* (editions 4,5 and 6) and the 30th anniversary of the exchange program in 2001 (editions 10 and 11). The 2010 edition of *Tsuru* features a report about the events surrounding the 400th anniversary of contact between Mexico and Japan, the 2014 edition has a lengthy special section on 40 years of Japanese official development assistance (ODA) to Mexico, and the 2016 edition devotes four pages to commemorating the 45th anniversary of the exchange program. These similarities underscore the fact that the exchange program alumni are important agents of cultural diplomacy between Japan and Mexico; they have a deep knowledge and appreciation of the other country, its history, culture and traditions, and continue to disseminate their knowledge and positive experiences to their compatriots. The existence of commemorative events surrounding the program itself can also be perhaps taken as evidence of the long-term impact of participation and the continued identification of alumni with the objectives and accomplishments of 50 years of exchange

between the two countries.

5. Assessing Portability, Dependability and Sustainability from the Newsletter Evidence

With regard to applying Miyake's criteria to the effectiveness of the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program, evidence from the publications suggests that all three categories (portability, dependability and sustainability) are fulfilled to some degree. Portability, the idea that knowledge gained in one locus can be applied in other places, is present almost by default in an exchange program of this sort, as participants from both countries return to their country of origin after a year and apply what they learned abroad in the short term. This is strongly evident in many of the reports published in *Tsuru*, which relate to technical issues where alumni are applying the expertise that was deepened by time spent training in Japan. In a similar vein, the careers of the Mexican alumni seem to confirm that the knowledge they gained in Japan was dependable, meaning that it can be applied when needed, even under different circumstances. It also seems to be sustainable, a long-term indicator of effectiveness, serving as a basis for continuous learning about both their fields of expertise and Japan, though this final point would need to be confirmed with individual alumni to gauge the depth of sustainability. From the features in *Águila y Sol*, it is slightly more difficult to gauge the degree of dependability as a medium-term result because many of the features involve current events or observations on immediate experiences (such as the reports from current participants) rather than discussion of the skills and knowledge learned in Mexico being applied in the careers of Japanese alumni or their daily lives. On the other hand, sustainability is shown in several ways, such as participation in Mexico-related events, most notably the annual Mexico Seminar, as well as diverse articles relating to Mexican history, archaeology, literature and culture, reflecting a long-lasting interest in Mexico and a thirst to know more among members of the alumni association.

Supporting the argument for portability, dependability and sustainability, the *Tsuru* interview with JICA Mexico director Shinoyama Kazuyoshi (2016: 15) can serve as evidence. In his comments regarding the role alumni play in Mexico, he states that they not only learn from the different programs they participated in but adapt them to Mexican circumstances (portability). At least in the case of the Mexican participants, they spread their knowledge through teaching courses, seminars and other academic endeavors (dependability). Shinoyama calls alumni a bridge between Mexico and Japan in science, technology, culture and cooperation, and states that they “have the opportunity to participate in the challenges of sustainable development and because of this they should continue focusing themselves towards achieving this objective” (15; translated from Spanish by the author). This speaks to the dependability and sustainability of their learning from the exchange program, which Shinoyama further reinforces by averring that alumni help JICA in assessments of projects, recommending expert

partners, improving their professional and social surroundings, bringing new perspectives, and making efforts to diminish the gaps between the countries. All of these factors point to circumstances in which what was learned during the exchange program continues to be reinterpreted and reapplied by alumni over time, attesting to a sustained application of knowledge and skills. This testimony, along with the broader analysis of the contents of *Tsuru* and *Águila y Sol*, point to the long-term achievement of the exchange program's goals when viewed through the lens supplied by Miyake.

6. Conclusion

While the analysis from the newsletters indicates that alumni continue to use the knowledge and skills gained from the Japan-Mexico Exchange Program over short, medium and long terms, it must be acknowledged that claims made based on only two print sources cannot serve as definitive proof of positive long-term impact, but rather as one piece in a larger puzzle. It can be further stated that the print-based evidence for portability, dependability and sustainability is stronger on the Mexican side than the Japanese, which may be a reflection of both the professional status of Mexican participants and the deep relationship with JICA that shapes how ASEMEJA engages with and presents itself to Mexican society. There is also the possibility that the features in both newsletters reflect the interests of the most actively engaged members of the alumni associations, and thus the content of the newsletters may not be broadly representative of the association membership's continuing relationship to the exchange program and the host country. Within the ongoing research, an online questionnaire and structured interviews are also being used to assess long-term effects and benefits of the program, and these data sources will help the research team determine whether *Tsuru* and *Águila y Sol* are solid sources of evidence for long-term effects of participation. However, until the data for both sides are collected and analyzed, partial evidence such as can be gleaned from *Tsuru* and *Águila y Sol* is of value despite its limitations. Ultimately, the information gathered from the newsletters help us to understand that participation in the exchange program does have long-lasting and positive effects on the lives of the alumni, and that a significant enough number of them continue to take an interest in the experience that they belong to and contribute to the alumni associations. This fact can in and of itself be evidence of sustainability and testimony to the long-term positive effects of this kind of international exchange program on the individuals who have taken part in it, and for Japan and Mexico, of the value in continuing the program past its 50th anniversary, while also providing an analytical tool for other researchers to employ when attempting to assess exchange programs over longer timeframes.

Notes

1 JSPS Project # 0118KK0061, 日本メキシコ双方向の長期的留学成果～政府 (English title: Long-term Outcomes)

of the Bilateral Student Exchange Program Between Mexico and Japan: 50 Years of Governmental Cultural Diplomacy).

2 90 to 100 participants were sent between the two countries from 1971 until 1982, with some exceptions. Since 1983 the numbers have fluctuated depending on interest in the program and circumstances; in 1986 no participants were sent because of the earthquake that struck Mexico City that year. From 1987 to 1998 the maximum number per year was 30. Since 1999 the number has hovered around 50 from each country, though in 2020 and 2021 the program has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on figures compiled by Kazuyasu Ochiai of Meisei University from various sources and presented to the research project team 17 December 2018 at the Nagoya University Office in Tokyo.

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Appendix A: *Águila y Sol* 1-14; 27; 30; 33; 35; 38-39

| Repeated contents | Edition |
|------------------------|--|
| メキシコだより・留学生だより | 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 30, 33, 35, 38, 39 *8, 10, 13 appeared as 留学生だより |
| メキシコセミナー | 1, 3, 12, 27, 30, 33, 35, 38 |
| 派遣生OBの手になるメキシコ関連の文献 | 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 |
| グルメ情報 | 1, 2, 5 |
| 外務省だより | 1, 4, 6, 8 |
| 挨拶 | 2, 3, 7 |
| 日本メキシコ移住100周年関係 | 4, 5, 6 |
| 交流計画30周年 | 10, 11 |
| メキシコ大使館新文化担当/大使館スタッフ関係 | 8, 12, 13 |
| 編集後記 | 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 30, 35, 38, 39 |
| 表紙紹介 | 30, 35, 38, 39 |
| 生活報告 | 38, 39 |

Source: Author

Appendix B: *Tsuru* Thematic Content by Year (2010, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2020) and Crossover with Other Categories

| Year and number of crossovers/thematic content | 2010 | 2011 | 2014 | 2016 | 2020 |
|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| Desarrollo Industrial [Industrial Development] | 3 1 crossover with Cooperación Sur-Sur | 3 | 3 1 crossover with Medio Ambiente | 2 1 crossover with Cooperación Sur-Sur | 2 |
| Medio Ambiente [Environment] | 2 | 8 6 crossovers with Seguridad Humana | 4 1 crossover with Cooperación Sur-Sur | 3 | |
| Seguridad Humana [Human Security] | 4 1 crossover with Cooperación Sur-Sur; 1 crossover with Becarios | 7 6 crossovers | 1 | 1 | |
| Cooperación Sur-Sur [South-South Cooperation] | 4 (2 crossovers) | 1 | 2 1 crossover | 1, crossover with Desarrollo Industrial | 1 |
| Eventos especiales [Special Events] | 400 Años México-Japón [400 years, Mexico-Japan] | | | | |
| Arte [Art] | 3 | 3 One crossover with Sección especial | 3 | 3 (called Arte y Cultura in this edition) | 1 |
| Asociaciones de exbecarios [Alumni Association] | 1 | | | | |
| Becarios [Participants] | 4 (1 crossover) Mensajes de becarios | | | | |
| Sección especial [Special Section] | | 3 One crossover Mensajes de exbecarios | 5 (40 años de cooperación para el desarrollo con México, 60 años de la asistencia oficial para el desarrollo de Japón en el mundo) | 4 (Incluso 45 Aniversario del Programa de Intercambio México Japón) | 1 (Entrevista al Director General de JICA-México) |
| Desarrollo Tecnológico [Technological Development] | | | | | 1 |
| Formación de Recursos Humanos [Human Resource Training] | | | | | 1 |
| Cultura y Humanismo [Culture and Humanism] | | | | | 1 |

Source: Author