

Transforming from Dual to Joint: The Evolution of a 25+ Year International Partnership

Amy Marrion

International Programs Manager, American University, Washington, D.C. USA

Email: amy.marrion@gmail.com

Tags

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Setting

A private medium-sized liberal arts university located in the United States offers more than 100 study abroad programs and over half of their undergraduate students study abroad prior to graduation. The university operates a central study abroad office, in addition to several smaller, decentralized study abroad offices that typically manage unique partnerships that promote school-specific international programs.

One of the smaller study abroad offices has been considering the next phase in a dynamic 25+ year institutional partnership with a large, private university located in Japan. The active Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between the schools include exchanges for faculty and students at the graduate and undergraduate level. In addition, there are opportunities for bilateral graduate and undergraduate dual degrees to obtain a degree from each school. These programs are generally popular and expected to be renewed when the current five-year MOU expire next year. However, in the meantime, both schools are interested in exploring new avenues for collaboration to further develop this transformational partnership well into the future.

Case

The U.S. and Japanese universities schedule annual campus visits for faculty and staff to review existing programs, discuss issues, and strategize for the future. During an annual visit to the U.S. university, the Japanese delegation of faculty and staff proposed the idea of creating an undergraduate joint degree during a meeting with the study abroad staff and key faculty members from the U.S. university.

The faculty and staff from the Japanese university explain that the proposed joint degree would be the first of its kind between a U.S. and Japanese university. Although the finer mechanics of the program would take significant time to develop, the Japanese delegation explains that the basis of the innovative joint degree would enable students to start their degree at either school, complete two years at each school, and graduate with one degree, jointly-endorsed by both schools. The admissions and enrollment processes would be jointly administered between the two schools by a committee(s) comprised of faculty, staff, and various administrators from both schools. The creation of the joint degree would also align, to varying degrees, with each university's current strategic plans.

The idea of the joint degree, proposed by the Japanese university, partially stems from the long-standing undergraduate dual degree that currently exists between the two schools. During its history, the dual degree has produced more than 500 alumni around the world. Alumni of the dual degree have earned two degrees; one degree from each school. The degrees may be similar, in international studies from the U.S. university and global studies from the Japanese university, or they may be in a different discipline, like business or communications. The dual degree students have traditionally completed two degrees, which means that they were required to complete two separate sets of curricular requirements in order to earn both degrees.

While the dual degree has been successful, and historically popular among students based in Japan, it has faced several challenges over the years. Interest from U.S.-based students is historically low, possibly because dual degrees are less-known in the U.S.¹, and, in the last few years, enrollments from Japan-based students have dropped, as well. There are many factors that could have driven lower enrollment from Japan-based students. One factor may be due to an increase in the minimum accepted scores on common English language proficiency tests, like the TOEFL and IELTS, required by all non-native English speakers to attend the U.S. university.

In addition to building off the long-standing partnership, by proposing the joint degree, the Japanese university plans to continue to work collaboratively with their U.S. counterparts to create an opportunity that is attractive to both U.S. and Japan-based students. They hope to serve as a model for future international joint degrees by promoting a truly global and cross-cultural educational experience, an experience that yields many outcomes and benefits increasingly sought out by future employers. The study abroad staff at the U.S. university believe this opportunity aligns well with its five-year strategic plan to expand experiential learning opportunities.

The U.S. university is eager to explore this new venture with the Japanese university and would like to learn more. The Japanese university explains that they envision the joint degree featuring a jointly created curriculum, meaning faculty from each school will work together to create joint-courses, or each school may have to have curricula approved by their respective school committees, etc. The schools will need to explore immigration

¹ See American Council on Education. (2014). Mapping international joint and dual degree programs – U.S. program profiles and perspectives. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mapping-International-Joint-and-Dual-Degrees.pdf>
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implications for two years abroad and decide on language requirements for students in the U.S. and students in Japan. The joint degree will also culminate with a single, jointly issued, diploma. Therefore, both schools will have to collaborate on a diploma that meets the needs and requirements of both schools. The details will take significant time and effort to develop, refine, and have approved, but the U.S. and Japanese universities agree to explore the idea of an undergraduate joint degree as the next step in their long-standing partnership.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some motivations for a transformational partnership (like the one described in the case) vs. a more transactional international partnership? How could each school benefit from offering such an integrated program?
- What are some challenges that might arise with developing a joint curriculum and/or courses between the schools? Who are the primary stakeholders to have involved in these initial and future discussions?
- What are some important details that will need to be examined and explored between the two schools? (think – language, student mobility, finances, professional development opportunities, accreditation procedures in the U.S. and Japan, etc.)
- Describe a joint-admissions process for this program. Would prospective students apply to both schools? Why might it be beneficial to only apply to one school? What are some strategies both schools could use to develop an accessible and efficient joint-admissions process?
- Should there be a limit on the number of students admitted each year? What are the pros and cons to smaller/larger cohorts?
- How could the U.S. academic unit that manages this partnership, and the future joint-degree program, work with its school's central study abroad office, and other decentralized international program offices, to further explore the idea of offering a joint-degree?
- What if one of the universities ultimately decides they cannot commit to creating the joint degree at this time? How could they communicate this to their long-standing partner without damaging the partnership?