

Reimagining India-Japan relations: The transformative role of universities

By C Raj Kumar



A stronger and more substantive educational partnership can result in the creation of the talent, trust and shared understanding needed to sustain India-Japan collaboration for multiple generations

India and Japan are at a pivotal moment in their relationship. Both countries are trying to find their place in the rapidly changing global environment. In this context, the most important investment they can make is not only in infrastructure or technology, but in education.

I believe that India and Japan need to build a transformative relationship for the 21st century, where education transitions from the margins to the centre of bilateral engagement between India and Japan. The next chapter of India-Japan relations should have a multi-pronged approach focusing on academic collaboration, developed through universities.

Academic collaboration large-scale student mobility

The most important policy priority should be to dramatically increase student mobility. India sends thousands of students abroad every year. Most students prefer destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Europe. Unfortunately, Japan rarely appears among the preferred destinations for Indian students despite possessing world-class universities.

Japanese universities are leaders in advanced technology, with strong research capabilities, world-class laboratories, and prolific scholars. They provide learning opportunities leading to potentially significant employment outcomes. This impasse

vis-à-vis Indian students must change. India and Japan should focus on bringing at least 50,000 Indian students to Japanese universities over the next decade. We need to develop scholarships, tuition fee support, language training programmes, preparatory programmes, and a significantly simplified admission system, all of which should support this objective.

On the other hand, Japanese students should be encouraged to spend semesters, summer and winter programmes, and pursue research opportunities in Indian universities. The vision of educational mobility must become a central feature of India-Japan relations rather than a peripheral activity of marginal significance.

Reforming the visa regime and employment policies

Indian students tend to prefer English-speaking destinations because these countries are believed to have clear and predictable pathways from education to employment. The visa regimes in these countries have enabled graduates to have post-study work opportunities.

Japan should adopt an attractive framework that draws on the vision of these countries when it comes to creating incentives for Indian students to study and then plan towards working in Japanese society.

Indian students who choose to complete their higher studies in Japanese universities should be awarded streamlined work opportunities and work visas after their studies.

There is a case for a multi-year automatic work visa pathway pursuant to graduation, which would significantly enhance Japan's attractiveness for Indian students.

This suggestion assumes significance in the light of the fact that Japan faces demographic decline, labour shortages, and an ageing population. On the other hand, India is gifted with the world's youngest population. The complementarities between India and Japan are obvious.

The focus on educational mobility and skilled migration between India and Japan should be seen from the perspective that is mutually beneficial than an independent policy domain.

Establishing Japan studies centres in India and India studies centres in Japan

There is a case for establishing a nationwide network of Japan Studies centres in leading Indian universities, anchored by a flagship institution inspired by Hiroshima's remarkable journey from devastation to renewal. Such centres of Japan Studies would not only study Japan's history; they would also examine how universities, research institutions, companies, business enterprises and innovation ecosystems contributed to Japan's rise from the ashes of war to become one of the world's most advanced and thriving economies. Instead of functioning as symbolic academic centres, they ought to become vibrant hubs of learning, knowledge sharing, and experience gathering, through language training, policy research, public lectures, collaborative projects, interdisciplinary initiatives, capacity-building programmes, and experiential learning.

In the same way, universities in Japan should establish or strengthen India Studies centres that would examine India's history, economy, political system, technological transformation, social diversity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

A holistic partnership between India and Japan requires a range of experts and, in the absence of their availability, despite strong diplomatic and economic ties, the outcome can remain superficial. Therefore, universities have a critical role in cultivating the longitudinal intellectual understanding that transcends beyond government engagement.

Corporate funding for research

Japanese corporations have achieved extraordinary success in India. Indian companies are beginning to expand their presence in Japan. These companies should invest systematically and substantially in university partnerships.

Japanese corporations operating in India and Indian companies in Japan should support: Research Chairs; Research Centres; Fellowships; Scholarships; Academic Exchanges; Policy Research Initiatives. Such programmes would help universities focus on developing long-term expertise while recognising that students who gain exposure to real-world industry perspectives can make a significant contribution to the relationship. Corporate involvement will also help bridge the gap between academic learning and workforce requirements. These investments may be viewed as acts of corporate philanthropy.

They also are, or ought to be seen as, strategic investments in future talent, innovation, technology transfer, and cross-border collaboration. Over a period of time, sustained corporate engagement can also contribute to the establishment of a powerful knowledge partnership that connects universities, industries, and governments.

Such an initiative would strengthen intellectual exchange, institutional partnership, and economic cooperation, resulting in the India-Japan relationship being more resilient and future-oriented.

India and Japan should work towards creating joint research centres that focus on critical challenges such as artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, robotics, machine learning, semiconductor technologies, climate change, sustainable energy, water security, public health, urbanisation and demography.

Japan has globally recognised strengths in industrial innovation, precision engineering, and advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence and robotics. India, on the other hand, has seen remarkable capabilities in software development, digital technologies, frugal innovation, entrepreneurship, and large-scale implementation. The complementary strengths of both India and Japan, when combined, can create opportunities for breakthroughs that can benefit not only both these countries but also the wider region.

The Indian and Japanese initiatives through joint research, government laboratories, private companies, and start-up ecosystems must become the future of India-Japan relations.

The researchers of both countries should be able to connect with each other easily through institutions, share expertise, collaborate on projects, and work together on initiatives with practical and pragmatic applications. Such cooperation would fast-track innovation while strengthening long-term academic collaboration.

The collaboration between Indian and Japanese universities ought to extend beyond science and engineering. Social sciences, public policy, law, economics, governance, and international relations must also become major areas of cooperation.

There is an urgent need to understand technological change, demographic transitions, and geopolitical developments, all of which will require interdisciplinary research leading to broad-based academic collaboration, which is essential for addressing 21st-century challenges.

The way forward

A stronger and more substantive educational partnership can result in the creation of talent, trust, and shared understanding that is needed to sustain the India-Japan collaboration for multiple generations. The indicators of this successful relationship in the decades ahead will be:

- The students who cross borders to learn.
- The researchers who work together to solve common challenges.
- The institutions that deepen the shared understanding of both societies.

These human connections will outlast political cycles, government priorities, trade preferences and economic fluctuations.

If India and Japan place education at the heart of their partnership, they will be leading the development of a knowledge-driven future for Asia.

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