

# Beyond Bilateralism and Multilateralism?: The Significance of Japanese Aid to University-Level Quality Reform in Southeast Asian Engineering Education

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## Abstract

Be it through the establishment of bilateral partnership institutions or multilateral quality enhancement projects, over the past two decades, the Japanese government has invested tens of millions of dollars in official development assistance (ODA) to improve Southeast Asian university-level engineering and technology education. Drawing upon ODA project-related documents and site visit interviews, this study explores why Japan devoted so much ODA resources to such a narrow goal. On the one hand, these projects continued Japan's long-standing commitment to the *hitozukuri* ("human resource development") of its Southeast Asian partners. On the other hand, they represent an important departure from past approaches, as this aid, through its increasing emphasis on goal-oriented multilateral collaborations, has also garnered widespread regional goodwill at relatively low cost.

*Keywords:* Engineering Education, *Hitozukuri* Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Official Development Assistance

## 1 Educational Quality in an International Context

The importance placed on enhancing university-level educational quality is not unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it has become increasingly systematized and formalized in recent decades. As Altbach and Knight have noted [1], since the 1990s, the global North has initiated several internationalization processes that have shaped and developed the practices and institutions of higher education (HE) worldwide. Be it the Bologna Process setting down broad guidelines of higher education quality in Europe or discipline-based quality arrangements such as the International Engineering Alliance's Washington Accords, Western-led HE institutions have exercised disproportionate influence in shaping quality practices. Be it reform initiatives such as the EU-led SHARE program in Southeast Asia or international quality institutions such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, this trend has been solidified as HE systems worldwide have sought to share and develop the theories and good practices of quality assurance [2][3].

Although efforts to develop global HE quality in the 2000s and 2010s were facilitated through multilateral agreements, bilateral partnerships among national HE systems have also remained significant. In a world increasingly characterized by competing nation-states vying

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to exercise global influence, such partnerships--by their ability to develop human resources and deepen institutional and cultural ties--continue to be a potential vehicle for enhancing geo-political stature [4]. The United States's longstanding use of HE-centered exchange and cooperative programs to facilitate soft-power is well known [5][6]; meanwhile China's use of aid to overseas HE systems to increase international influence has attracted similar scholarly attention [7][8][9]. Even middle powers such as Germany, France, South Korea, Australia and the UK have used their own HE systems to expand global prestige--and their bottom lines. A recent study of international students' tuition fees and expenses at UK universities, for example, found that the nation garnered 41.9 billion British pounds or approximately 560 pounds per UK citizen [10].

## 2 Japanese Development Efforts in Southeast Asia HE

Japan has also been a part of these larger trends of international HE development. The nation's use of official development assistance (ODA) in bilateral HE projects dates to the 1950s. As Kayashima et. al. have argued [11], however, Japan's education-oriented ODA has also been distinctive because of its emphasis on *hitozukuri*--translated as "human resource development" or, more literally, "person making." With its emphasis on developing the skills and work attitudes of labor forces in ODA recipient countries, such *hitozukuri* policies seemed well-aligned to a late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese economic superpower attempting to establish international labor supply chains with itself at the center. Critics of this discourse have also argued that *hitozukuri* carried moralistic overtones implying hierarchical assumptions of the superiority of Japan over developing countries [12]. Regardless, at the height of its boom economy in the 1980s, the Japanese government initiated the ASEAN Hitozukuri Co-operation Project which established centers for developing human resources and technical expertise among its closest Southeast Asian partners [13].

With the collapse of its economy from the 1990s, however, Japan's total ODA resources declined in relative terms, being surpassed by Germany and the UK in total expenditures in the 2010s [14]. Japan also paid more attention to multilateral educational initiatives and began echoing international norms when explaining its aid-giving strategies through its ODA Charters [15][16]. Despite this rhetorical change, however, bilateral projects still assumed the lion's share of ODA assistance, with recent years seeing the ratio hovering around 80% of funding [17]. Indeed, bilateralism in HE-related ODA has arguably become more pronounced. As Kayashima notes, recent projects--perhaps with the hopes of effecting more positive diplomatic relations--have come to frequently include "Japan" in the ODA initiatives' very names [18]. Examples highlighting this self-consciously "Japanese" approach to HE ODA include the founding of the Egypt-*Japan* University of Science and Technology in 2009, the Malaysia-*Japan* International Institute of Technology (MJIIT) in 2011, the Vietnam-*Japan* University (VJU) in 2015, and the Myanmar-*Japan* Technological Development Centers (MJTDC) in 2019.

Given Japan's overall economic decline in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the nation's continued attempt to support overseas HE development projects might be surprising. As seen from the list of partnership institutions above, however, it is also important to note the concentration of these projects in Southeast Asian, technology oriented HE. At its peak in the 2010s, the Japanese government devoted tens of millions of dollars annually in ODA funds to improving Southeast Asian HE, particularly in the fields of engineering and technology. This ranged

from research and infrastructure support of individual universities (e.g. 4.8 billion yen to the Bandung Institute of Technology between 2009-2018) to the funding of joint scientific research through the Science and Technology Research Partnership for Sustainable Development (SATREPS) program, wherein 43% of grants (as of early 2025) involved HE institutions from eight Southeast Asian nations [19][20]. As seen below, Japan also embarked on an ambitious round of HE development projects that sought to improve the educational quality of university-level engineering programs throughout the region. Why did Japan spend so much of its increasingly scarce ODA capacity to support this narrow, seemingly esoteric area of development? Whereas the explanation of *hitozukuri* made sense when Japan was a nascent economic super-power forging new global supply chains, it seems less convincing for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Japan devolved into a middle-power economy, with middle-power resource limitations.

### 3 The Research Project and Methods

This article tries to make sense of Japan's HE projects in Southeast Asia by going beyond conventional analyses of ODA efforts as either multilateral system building or bilateral relationship strengthening. Instead, it tries to understand the nature of Japan's large and sustained support of the region's HE engineering education through the lens of soft-power influence and geo-strategic relevance. Whereas Japan's ODA in Southeast Asian HE might seem multilateral in the sense that it attempted to normalize globally accepted practices of quality assurance and enhancement, it has also remained distinctly bilateral in its emphasis on long-term cooperation and nation-level trust-building. These initiatives are in line with a growing trend seen in international relations research emphasizing flexible, *ad hoc*, goal-oriented arrangements, often characterized by scholars as "minilateralist" [21][22][23]. 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan might no longer be capable of exercising system-level, super-power hegemony, but through its use of minilateralist arrangements, it has maintained the capacity to exercise significant regional influence. In the case of Southeast Asian university-level engineering education, the discourse of *hitozukuri* remains relevant, but it now operates within an international context far different –and more competition filled-- than when it was originally formulated during Japan's late-20<sup>th</sup> century economic golden age.

Through a research grant from the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science (Basic Research, Level C, #23K02514), the authors have conducted a mixed-methods study of relevant ODA projects in Southeast Asian university-level engineering and technology education. The current study remains descriptive, drawing chiefly upon relevant published documents, particularly those from the Japan's official development aid organization, the Japan International Cooperative Agency (JICA). In addition, this analysis is augmented by a series of unpublished site visit interviews (conducted between 2024 and 2025) of project-related stakeholders in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand. Visit destinations included local JICA offices in all four countries; the project sites of MJIIT, VJU, the Indonesian Accreditation Board of Engineering Education (IABEE), and the office of the Southeast Asian Engineering Education Development Network (SEED-Net) program; accreditation organizations in Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam; as well as seven universities, with three in Thailand, two in Vietnam and one each in Malaysia and Indonesia. Site visit interviews were set up on a chain referral basis. The interviews were semi-structured, usually lasting between 60-90 minutes, with participants being senior administrators (e.g. at the head, director, and dean level), or project-relevant academic and operational staff. Site visit interviews were

themselves based upon a series of questions sent to interviewees beforehand. The questions asked interviewees to evaluate the success of relevant Japanese ODA projects and to compare them to similar ODA efforts of other nations. Interviews followed consent and ethics guidelines approved by the Kansai University of International Studies Research Ethics Committee (Reference #R5-42), the home institution of the primary investigator and lead author.

#### 4 The Successes and Limits of Bilateral *Hitozukuri*

Recent Japanese ODA projects have remained part of a longer tradition of support for *hitozukuri* and the development of human resources. In the early part of the 2010s, for example, JICA embarked on three separate HE technology education development programs that explicitly devoted themselves to facilitating *hitozukuri* in the region. Starting with MJIIT in 2011, Japan, through a partnership arrangement with the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), budgeted approximately 7 billion yen in ODA loans and grants to the project. Its goals were similar to ODA projects of decades past in that it pledged, “to cultivate human resources” comprised of a “high level of technological and research capability and inculcated with good working culture” [24]. The project created a stand-alone school, eventually expanding to 13 academic programs and 1500 enrolled students, within UTM’s Kuala Lumpur campus [25]. At the same time, MJIIT’s approach was novel in its explicit touting of uniquely “Japanese” educational characteristics. Whereas its academic programs remained answerable to Malaysian quality assurance guidelines, the new curriculum also adopted a so-called *iKohza* system--where students worked collaboratively with faculty members on project-based research--as well as emphasizing a learning culture based on “*sempai-kohai*” relationships (i.e. where older students looked after younger students). It also emphasized such “Japanese” educational components as *ningenryoku* (i.e. human-relationship skills), *monozukuri* (i.e. pride in craftsmanship), extensive Japanese-language instruction, and industrial training opportunities with Japanese organizations [24][26]. Most noteworthy, MJIIT linked these aspects to broader geopolitical trends, specifically citing former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s pro-Japan, “Look East” policy. As MJIIT’s 10-year commemorative book explained:

Every successful project began with a vision. In our story, this one-of-a-kind vision was unveiled by Tun Dr. Mahathir himself, as part of Malaysia’s unique Look East Policy blueprint. From a dream and vision, MJIIT now stands as an iconic higher education touchstone delivering Japanese oriented engineering education in the region [27].

With this broader political support, the MJIIT project has proven successful. Although early discussions about founding MJIIT as a stand-alone university were abandoned, the authors’ 2024 site visits of relevant MJIIT stakeholders confirmed that it had garnered enough local support to remain self-sustaining even after the formal Japanese ODA project ended in 2023.

Beyond MJIIT, JICA also actively engaged in other bilateral projects in Southeast Asian technology education. Two initiatives in Myanmar, the 2013 “Project for Enhancement of Engineering Higher Education in Myanmar” and the 2014 “Project for Enhancing Technological Universities” provided approximately 4 billion yen in aid to that nation’s two leading technology universities. The first project sought to improve the quality of Myanmar university-level teaching by helping its engineering faculty obtain doctoral degrees at Japanese HE institutions, as well as training academic staff in improving their curriculum through PDCA-

cycle-based education program management, faculty development good practices, “industrial practical training” at Myanmar-based Japanese companies, and the use “Japanese style lab-based education.” Likewise, the second project provided leading Myanmar technology universities with cutting edge engineering equipment and facilities, eventually leading to the establishment of the MJTDC at Yangon Technological University in 2019. [28][29].

The most ambitious bilateral Southeast Asian HE development project, however, was the VJU project in Hanoi. Established with 200 million USD in Japanese government ODA, VJU was founded in the mid-2010s as a constituent university of Vietnam National University [30]. VJU was explicitly *hitozukuri*-oriented in its goals and bilateral in its approach. As stated on its University Mission webpage, VJU sought “to nurture high-quality human resources” as well as to “promote knowledge transfer between Vietnam and Japan” while realizing its longer-term goal of becoming a “flagship research-oriented university in Asia in advanced technologies and interdisciplinary science.” In contrast to the explicitly “Japanese” educational aspects emphasized by MJIIT, VJU was more generic in its educational characteristics. Its “Educational Philosophy” focusing on “liberal arts and sustainability”, for example, made its education less distinguishable from western universities [31]. Unlike another foreign partnership university, the Vietnam-German University, which highlighted its use of German quality assurance as a unique and beneficial aspect of its curriculum [32], VJU was slow to leverage the distinctive characteristics of Japanese HE as an institutional selling point. Quality assurance remained under the purview of Vietnamese institutions, with additional guidance provided by Japanese HE only at the program level and through *kanjin* (i.e. “advisor”) universities in Japan. Recent author site visits to VJU indicated that this lack of distinctiveness might have knock-on effects. Whereas VJU has proven successful in attracting applicants and finding employment for its graduates, some stakeholders remain uncertain whether the institution has yet succeeded in establishing a clear niche in the Vietnamese HE market and achieved the same level of institutional self-sustainability seen in MJIIT.

## 5 Strategic Benefits of Flexible, *Ad-hoc* Multilateralism

Japanese bilateral support of university-level Southeast Asian engineering education is noteworthy for the scope of resources invested; however, it is Japan’s multilateral ODA projects that are arguably more significant and distinctive. In contrast to conventional multilateral ODA arrangements, Japan’s recent multi-country collaborations in SE Asian HE have been less about norm-building (e.g. the EU SHARE Initiative and the Erasmus+ Program-funded TUNING-Asia Southeast Project [2][33]) per se, and more about expanding networks of co-operation centered around Japanese leadership and influence.

Nowhere was this strategic multilateralism more clearly seen than in Japan’s longest and most influential regional ODA HE project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the SEED-Net program. Founded through a cooperative agreement between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japan in 2001, SEED-Net was originally conceived of by the Japanese side as primarily a mobility and scholarship program, supporting ASEAN students in the attainment of Masters and Doctoral degrees in engineering. In line with the *hitozukuri* discourses of the past, it was seen as an initiative that would reduce the regional “brain drain” of knowledge workers and instead encourage a “brain circulation” of high-quality human resources throughout Asia [34]. Two unique aspects of the program, however, enhanced its significance to Southeast Asian HE engineering education quality. First, scholarship

recipients were limited to faculty/professors already teaching at 19 (and eventually 26) of the region's leading national research universities. It would increase the quantity of high-quality talent in the region by raising the education credentials of young engineering faculty at universities in less-developed ASEAN nations. During the program's operation between 2003-2023, approximately 1400 engineering faculty members received an advanced degree through the program. As a result, leading HE institutions from lesser-developed ASEAN nations such as those in Cambodia and Laos saw, respectively, between 18-30% and 89% of their engineering faculty participate in the program during the 2010s. Member institutions from Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines likewise had faculty participation rates of between 3-6%; while even relatively advanced engineering departments in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia still saw around 2-3% of their teachers obtain degrees through the program [35][36]. SEED-Net may have contributed to ASEAN human resource development, but it was less in a 20<sup>th</sup> century *hitozukuri* sense of cultivating better workers for a Japan-centered labor supply chain. Beyond the scope and nature of the program, SEED-Net was unique in that all MA scholarships were with Southeast Asian universities and only a fraction of PhD scholarships were Japan-only programs. According to available evidence, less than 20% of all scholarship students studied exclusively in Japan during the height of the program in the 2000s and 2010s. As a result of facilitating the matriculation of hundreds of scholarship students, the SEED-Net program effectively subsidized nascent engineering graduate programs in universities in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines [37][38][39]. Program evaluations specifically cited SEED-Net for spurring the formation of MA programs at participating Southeast Asian universities, as well as for promoting the "enhancement of graduate programs in English," its "development of a system of internationalization at each institution," and for its overall contribution to "University quality improvement" [40].

Equally important, SEED-Net evolved from a conventional human resource development program to one increasingly emphasizing joint research, innovation and professional networking. Such changes were often at the behest of Southeast Asian stakeholders concerned with long-term regional development. As SEED-Net Chief Academic advisor during the 2010s, Chitoshi Miki noted, the program took place in the context of ASEAN university partners taking increasing interest in Global University rankings as well as local companies placing greater value on employees with advanced research backgrounds [41]. Over time SEED-Net also evolved into a program increasingly emphasizing regional research collaboration and innovation. Whereas the chief goal of the program in 2003 was a more conventional *hitozukuri* need to "cultivate engineering human resources capable of stimulating industry for the long-term development of ASEAN," by 2013, SEED-Net's central aim became the "encouragement of regional joint problem solving, globalization and the raising of industrial sophistication within the Southeast Asia area" [42]. Reflecting this change, the project's 3<sup>rd</sup> phase (2013-2018) devoted more resources to innovation and collaborative research, such as through training courses on the "Management of Technology for young academic staff;" support for more ASEAN regional academic conferences, external research grant acquisition, and lastly, the "strengthening" of an "academic human network" designed to spur short-term research and teaching collaborations among Japanese and ASEAN academics. Perhaps most symbolically, this heightened emphasis on advanced research led the project to establish the *ASEAN Engineering Journal* in 2011, a refereed academic journal that eventually became a SCOPUS registered publication [43][44]. Further developing regional research capacity, the ASEAN side also "strongly demanded" an increase in the number of participating Southeast Asian universities [45], ultimately expanding ASEAN member institutions from 19 to 26.

Japanese stakeholders' accommodation of a more research-oriented SEED-Net might not have been what was originally intended, but in being flexible with the project's specific aims, they arguably achieved a larger geostrategic goal of creating a region-wide web of cooperative relationships, goodwill and technological influence. It was also accomplished at the relatively inexpensive annual cost of between 500-800 million JPY—a cheaper price than either of the individual bilateral projects of MJIIT or VJU [46][47][48][49].

Lastly, Japan's strategic multilateralism could also be seen through its support of the establishment of Indonesia's Washington Accord-accessioned signatory body, IABEE. At the request of the Indonesian government in the early 2010s, JICA, through the consulting efforts of Japan's own engineering education accreditation body, the Japan Accreditation Board of Engineering Education (JABEE), helped Indonesia develop an engineering education quality assurance process conforming to the global standards of outcomes-based learning and quality enhancement practices set by the International Engineering Alliance. The IABEE project was explicitly multilateral in its attempt to propagate international norms of engineering education, but it was also multilateral through JABEE's clever recruitment of additional international partners—e.g. the US's Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the China Association of Science and Technology (CAST) and Engineers Australia—to train IABEE accreditors. As with SEED-Net, this multilateralism was also a cheap way to accrue diplomatic goodwill and technological prestige, costing Japan only 378 million yen for the project [50][51]. As a recent site visit of IABEE-related stakeholders confirmed, the IABEE project saw Japan leverage a multilateral network of leading engineering accreditor agencies to the benefit of a key bilateral partnership, and in so doing, ensured that Japanese organizations received preeminent credit among leaders in Indonesian HE engineering education.

## 6 Conclusion

Japan's support of the university-level engineering and technology education in SE Asian underscores the explanatory limits of simple bilateral and multilateral dichotomies in international relations theory. Despite Japan's continuing decline as an economic power, it has remained an important regional power commanding respect and influence. To be sure, these projects were not always successful. As seen in more conventional bilateral, *hitozukuri*-oriented HE development projects such as VJU, the current resource limitations of Japanese ODA constrained its ability to initiate large-scale, dynamic efforts possible with a true superpower. Even the relatively successful bilateral project of MJIIT appears to have been helped by the serendipity of Mahathir's "Look East" policy and other contingent factors. Indeed, one further reason for MJIIT's success was the fact that its Malaysian host institution, UTM, had already established a strong relationship with JICA as an active SEED-Net member and eventual host institution for that project's *ASEAN Engineering Journal* [44].

At the same time, whereas Japan's biggest successes in Southeast Asian HE could be characterized as multilateral in nature, it is important to emphasize how such arrangements' flexible and negotiated nature often advanced Japan's bilateral interests. Both SEED-Net and IABEE facilitated the spread of global norms even while such efforts directly enhanced Japan's geostrategic interests with individual ASEAN countries. To be sure, by involving local stakeholders more fully in the decision-making process, and by delegating some project duties to others, Japan was no longer able to steer initiatives as fully and thoroughly as before. The *hitozukuri*-orientation that characterized Japanese HE ODA during the latter half of the

20<sup>th</sup> century still remains, but it is only one of a host of additional goals advocated by local stakeholder with differing interests. At the same time, this strategic and collaborative approach to ODA has tended to be more cost-effective. Ultimately, the benefits of development projects such as SEED-Net and IABEE, however, might be less economic than geopolitical. Indeed, even as domestic commentators have raised concerns about a “crisis” in Japanese education and its ability exercise global soft-power influence [52], in the specific case of Southeast Asia, Japan appears to have remained as relevant as ever. As a recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey of regional leaders reveals, ASEAN nations still see Japan as more “trustworthy” than superpowers China and the US by significant margins, and remain the region’s 3<sup>rd</sup> most significant strategic partner [53]. Yet how enduring are such attitudes beyond momentary public opinion polls and HE collaborative arrangements? This study has explored the significance and ramifications of illustrative case studies, but further in-depth surveys of local attitudes and longitudinal changes are needed.

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