

# Mexico-Japan Technical and Academic Exchange Program in Transition: Challenges and issues of interculturality

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**Abstract.** Our principal objective is to explore if interculturality is relevant for the success of a bilateral student mobility program, Mexico-Japan Technical and Academic Exchange Program (MJTAEP). First, the authors explain their methodology and objectives of field work. Second, they situate their analysis within a framework of growing academic cooperation, common ends, and variability, depending on national objectives. Third, they consider the motivations/aspirations of Mexican fellowship holders, as stated by respondents to an electronic survey (106), as well as in-depth interviews (21). The authors look specifically at the quality of courses aimed at providing linguistic, cultural, and technical tools to the Mexican grantees. Two topics are evaluated in detail: (1) the drivers and obstacles of academic integration of Mexicans in Japanese universities, and (2) the acquisition of hard and soft skills (relationships with sensei, alumni or administrative officers and knowledge/proficiency requirements) to facilitate student incorporation in the host society and institutions.

**Keywords:** academic cooperation Mexico-Japan, culture shock, interculturality, professional mobility, training

## Introduction

Considering the main features of prior literature on international student mobility in Mexico and its repercussions, in this paper, we present an assessment of the Mexico-Japan Technical and Academic Exchange Program (MJTAEP), a bilateral mobility program, based on Mexican students' opinions. We address the Program's contribution to a limited yet significant diversification of the academic migration geostrategy in Mexico, and to the establishment of peer-to-peer cooperation, structured by constant monitoring. We consider this Program as a tool for training and a mechanism for intercultural interaction (ICD), defined as follows:

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ICD assumes participants come from different cultural (ethnic, linguistic, religious) contexts, implying that they will have divergent assumptions about, and rules for interaction. ICD takes understanding of cultural others as the immediate goal, saving the more advanced steps of achieving agreement and cooperation for potential later goals (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015).

From a Mexican perspective, we define MJTAEP as an interesting national experience because of its length (est. 1971), scope and its capacities for adaptation to eradicate barriers in response to suggestions of external evaluations or internal monitoring. Program implementation was continuous with only two interruptions, in 1986 (unknown reason) and 2020–2021 when, due to Covid-19, Mexican and Japanese stakeholders decided to suspend it temporarily, prioritizing the safety of online internationalization over the risks of physical travels (Nakasato & Kayashima, 2021).

Since its creation, more than half a century ago, MJTAEP has been a token of a constant political will for consolidating alternative exchange students' routes with the dominant ones (historically centered on the United States and, to a lesser extent, on Western European countries) to diversify international outgoing mobility and counterparts. From the time of its inception to the present day, the Program highlights organizational values such as reciprocity among partners, the ability to understand diverse aspirations according to context and capacities for adjusting the Program, from a perspective of education diplomacy and evaluation of resources and results (Uscanga Prieto, 2016). In this paper, we present an ex-post evaluation perspective analysis of the Program, emphasizing the perceptions of the beneficiaries regarding enablers and blockers for the accomplishment of MJTAEP's purposes. We examine those factors in relation with Program's internal criteria and external conditions.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes outline above, we will therefore present the results of fieldwork carried out in Mexico during 2021 and 2022 and the collective results of data analysis. First, we have reviewed the literature on academic cooperation between Mexico and Japan and their trends. Second, we conducted fieldwork focused on Mexican scholarship holders in Japan, through an online survey and in-depth interviews. The first instrument, largely inspired by an existing instrument designed by our Japanese colleagues to achieve similar approaches, dealt with concrete experiences and feelings of intercultural adaptation, in different generations of alumni.

The survey was distributed in Mexico via Google and was available for three months throughout 2021, with the generous support of the Association of Mexican Alumni in Japan (AC)—Asociación de Exbecarios de México en Japón A.C. (ASEMEJA) in Spanish—which distributed the survey to its members to help us to obtain their opinions, in a pandemic context which severely restricted this kind of qualitative research. The data (108 responses/106 usable ones) were augmented by 21 in-depth Zoom interviews with graduates from different MJTAEP generations (from 1975 to 2019) of grantees, carried

out by Mg. Ana. Fernanda Fraga Salgado—see Table 1. To the extent that neither National Council of Humanities, Sciences and Technology (CONAHCYT) nor the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) provided an exhaustive list of grantees, we used contacts to locate our first informants and then, according to a snowball dynamic, located other interviewees. Therefore, the sample cannot be considered random or representative.

**Table1. Alumni interviewed or respondents to online survey (2021) by year. (MJTAEP, Mexico)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of interviewees</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>
1975	1	1
1976	1	1
1983	0	1
1988	0	1
1989	0	1
1996	0	1
1988	0	2
1999	1	3
2000	0	7
2001	0	2
2002	0	1
2004	1	3
2005	0	1
2006	0	1
2007	1	4
2008	1	2
2009	1	6
2010	0	4
2011	1	3
2012	0	3
2013	0	6
2014	5	11
2015	2	11
2016	3	8
2017	0	8
2018	1	5
2019	2	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>106</b>

Source: Field work (interviews)

As a starting hypothesis, we suggest that the sharing of values and mechanisms derived from a notion of common interest, combined with different expectations about the Program, constituted the global framework of MJTAEP. Its objectives and the areas of disciplinary affiliation of the participants

were different in Japan (Hoshino et al., 2021) and in Mexico (Fraga Salgado & Didou Aupetit, 2021), more centered on humanities and social science in the former, and, in the latter, on technical areas. This divergence explains successive adjustments made during fifty years of implementation of the Program. In this context, in this paper, we essentially ponder the relevance and characteristics of the MJTAEP in Mexico, in a case study perspective, not in a comparative one, due to the current state of development of our project and parallel research done by Mexican and Japanese teams (Didou Aupetit, 2023).

### **General and specific objectives of the Mexican research project**

Considering previous theoretical approaches on models traveling (Olivier & Vari Lavoisier, 2022), we paid particular attention to the intercultural component of the MJTAEP, as a mechanism of progressive negotiation and reduction of cultural misunderstanding, in accordance with the increase of “translation capacities” and travel capital.

In this perspective, MJTAEP is generally valued as a successful tool for enhancing bilateral academic cooperation, focused on short mobility stays. This perception is corroborated by data on scholarships for short mobility abroad, granted by the CONAHCYT in 2021. By country of destination, 33 were granted in 2020 to stay in Japan out of a total of 3699 (apart from those financed by the MJTAEP, although we do not know how many grants were used, due to the pandemic). Unfortunately, follow-up data’s shortage on long-term stays and short-term support, during pandemic, makes difficult to delve deeper into this analysis. Hence, it is important to generate mutually informative data on the Program’s quantitative contraction, qualitative consolidation, and the first-hand evaluation of its beneficiaries and its outcomes in the short, medium, and long term (Ochiai, 2018) beyond short-sighted adjustments to increase its efficiency and to reduce obstacles identified by grantees, program officers or education authorities.

This is the origin of our emphasis on the evidence gathered through fieldwork. We structured it in an interpretative scheme considering internal dimensions (opportunities, distribution, skills acquisition) and external dimensions (user motivation, career path) as the foundational analytical axes. We organized information based on predefined key concepts (interculturality, learning, employability, existential transformation, values, and national particularities) from which we derived tabulators.

The main referents for this research project, agreed with our Japanese counterparts, consist of:

- The background and design of the Program and its relevance for strengthening technical and academic cooperation in higher education between Mexico and Japan
- The Program’s objectives, its dissemination, and operation mechanisms, including its internal changes (duration, disciplinary areas, number of grantees, and so on)
- Some sociodemographic characteristics and expectations of the participants
- The social, cultural, and linguistic experiences of the alumni before and during the Program

- Their academic practices and opinions about the learning processes
- The return to the country of origin and strategies for labor market (re)integration, using their competencies
- The use of what they have learned in their subsequent professional careers after the exchange ended
- The role of the Program's management bodies in monitoring alumni and maintaining their interactions with the host country
- The maintenance of relationships and interactions, professional or personal, with Japanese counterparts (Hoshino et al., 2021).

Central dimensions for the research project are—See Table 2.

## Literature review

Academic articles about outgoing student mobility flows are oriented towards the identification of leading hosts and sending countries of international students from the region. They are numerous studies of this nature in Mexico, offering an administrative perspective (Castiello Gutiérrez et al., 2022) or more comprehensive or analytical ones (Didou Aupetit, 2023). They are not centered on emergent patterns of international student mobility nor on the growing interest manifested by Mexican students participating in international exchange programs to explore new destinations, because of professional expectations, strategies to obtain a competitive skills profile for employment or cultural reasons.

Considering current studies on international alumni and mobility programs, we focused our literature review on contextual location of MJTAEP regarding to, first, international cooperation with higher education in Mexico, second, to cooperation with Asia on a regional scale, and third, to academic relationships between Mexico and Japan.

In relation to the first point, Japan represents an important partner for Mexico in Asia<sup>1,2</sup>. During the 2019 rectors of universities meeting, participants expressed their commitment to adopt the triple helix and South-South models for cooperation. This agreement makes it possible to combine expectations and priorities of active cooperation agencies in each country through programs such as the *Japan-Mexico Partnership*, which helps to increase student mobility abroad or the sending of Latin American scholarship holders to Japan<sup>3</sup>.

Universities, public and private, have signed an increasing number of inter-institutional agreements during the past decade. The purposes are boosting mobility, fostering joint research projects, or issuing

<sup>1</sup> However, this academic cooperation is limited. In 2017, CONAHCYT allocated 22 of its 2,938 grants for short- and medium-term stays in engineering, hard sciences and medicine, mainly. Between 2014 and 2017, the annual percentage of those attributed to Japan in relation to the total was less than 1%. Anyway, Japan, alternating with China, ranked first in scholarships for Mexicans in that region of Asia (Didou Aupetit, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gob.mx/amexcid/articulos/mexico-y-japon-colaboran-hacia-un-modelo-de-triple-helice?idiom=es>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jica.go.jp/mexico/espanol/activities/becas06.html>

**Table 2. General analytical framework on the Mexico-Japan technical and academic exchange program by observation dimensions and by interpretative axis: Mexico's case study**

Observation interpretation	Design, purposes and core of the program	Program adjustments	Dynamics	Dimensions
Motivation	Shared development through technical cooperation. Personal interest	Subjective evaluation of demand and aspirations	Rationality and/or opportunism in the choice of program	Expectations and realities. Satisfaction with social integration and learning
Interculturality	Previous knowledge on Japanese culture. Traveling experience	Program advantages and obstacles	Socio-demographic and cultural characteristics of students	Acquired values and difficulties in different social or academic scenarios
Professionalization	Focused on innovative or technical disciplinary areas	Role of "third parties": companies-government-networks	Immediate and mediate use of knowledge and competences for professional career	Maintenance of ties and partnerships
Politics	Regional and development cooperation. Cultural diplomacy. Soft power	Articulation with intergovernmental agreements	Training / employment / social competencies /distribution of specialized knowledge	Information and documentation of the program and graduates. Relationships with Nikkei community or others
Knowledge	Acquisition of technical /intercultural knowledge. Transmission of skills	Final work requirements.	Instrumental skills (Japan), technical knowledge and value skills	Diffusion mechanisms

Source: Elaborated by authors for evaluation of Mexico-Japan Technical and Academic Exchange Program

joint-degrees, mainly at National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)<sup>4</sup> or in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) located at the states of Guanajuato, Veracruz, Nuevo León, Jalisco, and Baja California (Ramírez Bonilla, 2017), where the presence of Japanese corporations is relevant in technological, chemical, and automotive sectors. They represented an attractive and very dynamic labor market for graduates of higher and middle higher education, awakening their interest in Japan.

This design and rationales of bilateral academic cooperation are linked to the growing economic

<sup>4</sup> <http://pueaa.unam.mx/blog/encuentros-y-configuraciones-cooperacion-mexico-japon>

importance of Japanese industry in Mexican territory where, in 2022, “around 1,200 companies (are) installed and a strong synergy has been achieved between Japan and Mexico” (Vynmsa, 2022). However, due to the volumes of mobile subjects involved, this cooperation is still relatively minor in the broader context of mobility schemes (Ramírez Bonilla, 2017, 2019). In this context of peripheral but booming cooperation, the MJTAEP represents one of the central axes and one of the main supports, historically and currently, of scientific and technical exchanges (Fraga Salgado & Didou Aupetit, 2021; Uscanga Prieto, 2019). It is considered as an efficient instrument for professional training and skills acquisition, in relation to the profile of grantees (professionals and governmental officers with previous work experience more than young students enrolled in Mexican universities), justification (contribution to improve technical skills of Mexican graduates to promote a national development scheme) and learnings (culture and language).

MJTAEP was innovative because it incorporated new beneficiaries (young professionals and education officers) and sought to transmit competencies required for evolving professional objectives. It worked as an instrument to diversify the purposes and the recipients of international higher education cooperation, but it did not reach its initial quantitative goals and, given low demand, since 1983, the annual number of financed scholarships decreased by half (from 100 in each direction to 50 or less) (Fraga Salgado, 2020). Despite those internal adaptations, MJTAEP remains as one axis of current higher education collaboration since, during the past decade, governments of Mexico and Japan opened specialized mechanisms for dialogue between Japanese and Mexican HEI's, focused on maintaining and boosting academic ties (Tanamachi Castro & Didou Aupetit, 2020).

Mexico has taken an active role in promoting cooperation opportunities with Japan. AMEXCID has published the *Monbukagakusho*'s recruitment calls for undergraduate, postgraduate, college of technology, and specialized training school, and the programs supported by CONAHCYT managed by MJTAEP.

Agencies/institutions involved in distribution, candidate selection, and supervision of MJTAEP in Mexico also monitor the achievement of the Program's objectives. These objectives consist of (1) human development as a lever for economic growth in developing countries, (2) expansion and diversification of the actors and channels related to MJTAEP; and (3) adaptation to environmental and global changes<sup>5</sup>.

In contrast, even though CONAHCYT finances part of the MJTAEP and publishes Calls for Mexican applicants<sup>6</sup>, it has not publicly disclosed annual figures on scholarship recipients, by area, gender, educational trajectories, or criteria for attributing scholarships to beneficiaries. During a commemoration, one Mexican officer estimated, however, that CONAHCYT had supported more than 4,500 scholarship recipients bilaterally.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.universia.net/mx/actualidad/becas-y-ayudas/programa-cooperacion-academica-internacional-entre-mexico-japon-celebra-su-40-aniversario-916492.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/japon/index.php/es/embajada/mexicanos-destacados>

## **Data exploration on academic cooperation between Mexico and Japan in a Mexican perspective**

Data on internationally mobile Mexican students shows that the largest volumes are going to United States (country that concentrated 41.6% of the total of Mexican students in outbound mobility in 2021) and, to a lesser extent, to Germany, Spain, France, and Great Britain (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). In contrast, data are scarcer regarding student migration to alternative countries and flows between distant counterparts, such as Japan and Mexico. They record that a total of 315 Mexican students were studying in Japan, in 2020. Mexico is 28<sup>th</sup> among the 145 that sends students to Japan but is the second in Latin America after Brazil (with 445 students). Unfortunately, the agency does not provide information on how many Japanese are studying in a Mexican HEIs (UNESCO, 2023).

Those data allow us to identify some similarities in the situation of both countries in terms of outgoing student mobility. Both send many mobile students to United States but receive international students as a result of proximity exchange schemes.

In Mexico, the number of incoming students currently exceeds that of Mexicans studying abroad, (51395 versus 32790). United States is the first country of destination and origin of international students (42.4% of the total), generating a relationship of dependency.

These data suggest, however, that the intercultural issue, which views student mobility as a generator of cultural exchange or internalization of new values, is not as much a priority in Mexico or Japan as it is in other national contexts with diversified inflows which are socially perceived as coming from different and distant cultures. Where student migration comes from places perceived as significantly culturally different or distinct by host societies, the integration of students, whether they have been justified by a choice to return to a location significant to their cultural heritage or the availability of grants (Cameron, 2023), becomes a concern.

This is not the situation in either case, because migrations of highly skilled human resources are essentially of geographical and cultural proximity, within the framework of economic or trade integration agreements. In the case at hand, both MJTAEP beneficiaries and partners have sought to be proactive in a solving problem perspective.

## **Achievements. Japanese language and culture learning: A trend of the Program but an institutional puzzle**

Mexican MJTAEP alumni expressed two main motivations for requesting a fellowship: study Japanese language and culture, both in México and during an initial period after their arrival to Japan and complete technical training during long or short stays (between 9 to 12 months and 3 weeks to two months).



Notwithstanding the weight of culture shock<sup>7</sup> was decreasing in recent generations because of the growing influence of Japanese culture in Mexico (manga, from *Naruto* to *Daemon Slayer* generations, music, food) and the relevance of actions to raise awareness of cultural differences, carried out successively in the country. It shaped how the Mexican grantees esteemed their international mobility rewards and personal capacities attainment and improvement (easy training, impact on optimization of their professional profiles, acquisition of specialized and intercultural skills, open mind).

Mexican students consistently indicated that their purposes were mainly technical or cultural, regardless of their disciplinary affiliation—See Table 3.

**Table 3. Motivations of Mexican alumni in the Mexico-Japan exchange program**

Motivation	No. of responses
Skills acquisition	79
Personal development	55
Conduct research in disciplinary fields	46
Proficiency in Japanese language	41
Cultural experience	37
Improve employment opportunities	23
Escaping from the status quo	14
Earn a master's or doctoral degree	5
Study foreign culture	4
Others	3
Fulfill company decisions regarding employee training	1
<b>Total*</b>	<b>308</b>

\* More than one response for each respondent

Source: Online Survey, 2021

As a very visible difference between the two countries, Mexican alumni were principally dedicated to obtaining technical training in industrial engineering, mechatronics, companywide quality control, medicine, and to a less extent, information science or intellectual protection and property rights. On other hand, Japanese were interested by training experience in humanistic and art areas.

Mexican fellows, although they put the dimension of the apprentice as a vital learning within the MJTAEP framework, consider that the internalization of intercultural capacities for understanding otherness enhances their technical training. Both processes of training and adaptability are enhanced, in a professional way. They are interconnected, beyond the type of specific knowledge acquired and its utilization for professional advancement. One interviewee mentioned that what he had learned in Japan

<sup>7</sup> 'Culture shock' has been identified as a psychological reaction to a change in cultural environment. The main symptoms of culture shock are reported to be psychological disturbance, a negative reaction to the new surroundings and a longing for a more familiar environment. Research has identified culture shock as a component, in the difficulties that international students face when studying in another country. One way that institutions of higher education have responded to these difficulties is to provide initial cultural orientation (McKinlay et al., 1996, p. 395).

helped him both to find a place in the labor market in Mexico (professional profile) and to integrate him into the business culture (intercultural competence):

The company I work for is a Japanese one, and thus, a significant portion of my interactions involve Japanese individuals. I must deal with Japanese and with people from the United States. To a certain extent, the little knowledge I had of Japanese culture helped me to be able to interact with Japanese people. ... One of the challenges I have experienced is the interaction between Japanese and Mexican people. One of my personal objectives in my field is what can I do to facilitate that communication, or the integration of what they offer to our culture? How can we generate trust to attract more projects? [Man; Japanese industry in Mexico; quality and productivity; Nagoya; 2019]<sup>8</sup>

When respondents were asked about the aspects they valued most and least in MJTAEP, they expressed a degree of satisfaction with the support services offered, both before mobility (e.g., in relation to the language and culture training course given in Mexico before leaving to Japan) and upon arrival in JICA houses, whose accompaniment and guidance services were highly appreciated, especially when those in charge of providing them showed empathy with the Mexican fellows and their ways of being.

They also expressed a positive opinion of the Japanese language and culture courses. They were particularly emphatic in underlining the interest of the courses taught in Mexico, due to the accumulated pedagogical experience of Mexican teachers. This regardless of whether students had previous sufficient level of Japanese (a minority) or not (the majority), a situation that implies that Japanese language training courses are not enough to enable their receivers to achieve fluent communication, once installed in Japan—See Table 4.

**Table 4. Proficiency in Japanese language of Mexican alumni**

Level	No. of responses
Nothing	48
Beginner	44
Intermediate	14
Native	0
Advanced	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>

Source: Field work, survey.

Although almost all respondents reported that they had communication difficulties, they did not blame the teaching of Japanese in Mexico or Japan, but their insufficient knowledge of Japanese

<sup>8</sup> [Gender; Sector of employment; Area of training; Place of stay; Year of technical stay]

language (or any other foreign language) before being selected. In any case, this interpretation indicates that the root of the problem lies not in the quality of the courses themselves, but in their duration in order to alleviate selection procedures that were flexible, especially when the MJPTAEP started, in relation to confirming that the previous language skills (both in Japanese and English languages) were sufficient to guarantee technical and cultural integration into Japanese society.

Look, the Mexico City course is the best language course I've ever taken. From the pedagogy, the system, the teachers, very good course. And that of Japan not so much, it was much more rigid, less dynamic, it was a single teacher; I kind of didn't quite know how to approach the group. Besides it was very heavy, it was a lot of hours and in Mexico you did not feel the hours of work. [Woman; Public university; Modern and traditional design; Kyoto; 2015]

Despite this initial positive approach, as demonstrated through the answers to a multiple-choice questionnaire, the analysis of the in-depth interviews gives reason to reconsider this initial and positive evaluation. While most of the informants recognized that Japanese courses had been useful to them, they were critical about the almost exclusive attention on the language, rather than on the acquisition of a technical vocabulary related to the grantees' area of specialization and/or communicative abilities for daily life in Japan. The teaching of courses on specialized languages in each disciplinary area supported by the MJTAEP is a demand widely expressed by the Mexican grantees.

Other objections concerned the national pedagogical scheme for knowledge transmission, very dissimilar in Japan and Mexico. Informants contrasted the conventional Japanese method for teaching idiomatic capacities with the "quality" attributed to the didactical process in Mexico, closer to the local academic approach.

Honestly, you arrive in Nagoya, to a center that looks like a hotel, the JICA Center, where you have a bathtub, where you have an international dining room and where the first weeks they tell you "put on your yukata, we are going to take you to the city of Toyota so that you know the first Toyota factory; let's go to the Sakura festival." All that month you are super accompanied and welcomed, if you get stuck something they help you. That is, well the people at the Front desk helped you so that you could send your postcards to your family, they did everything to you and suddenly you are released to a completely independent environment, because there if it is not homogenized, each program is different. [Woman; transnational industry (German); Industrial property; Osaka; 2014].

The time spent learning Japanese in Japan, at JICA house (Nagoya) or International Student Center (Tokyo) was generally seen as an opportunity to deepen intra-group living (Mexicans with Mexicans or with other Spanish-speaking students) and to mitigate exposure to intercultural challenges.

As expressed by former scholarship recipients, several problematic points are related to Japanese

grammar requirements, along with the selection of many graduates with no prior linguistic knowledge as scholarship recipients. In this regard, a sensitive point was the integration of the Japanese language groups which, in Japan, put together participants with various levels of linguistic proficiency, as opposed to what happened in Mexico, where the groups were segmented according to abilities of students. Concerning this organizational issue, the integration of Mexicans with or without previous knowledge, did not generate unanimous bonding. One of the interviewees pointed out that the blocker to their integration was the result of two incompatible models of intra-group solidarity in Mexico and in Japan, in accordance with different logics of inclusion and interpersonal interaction or friendship.

The difference between those of us who knew absolutely no Japanese and those who knew a lot was large; however, it was decided to put us all in one group. Therefore, within the same group, there were people who already had a very advanced Japanese level, as well as people who had not absolutely knowledge at all. When putting these two extremes together, people who had a lot of knowledge were frustrated because they were not going at the pace they might have liked, or some of them did not know more about the language, such as kanjis or other things more particular to Japan, for example. And those of us who knew absolutely nothing were frustrated too, because we could not participate as we would have liked to, given the desperation of the other people being like “this is the answer”, or “this is how it is written” or anything else. It was not a good combination and, yes, we frustrated each other. I don’t question their good intentions about what they wanted to put together; they seemed noble to me to a certain extent. However, I don’t think it applies much in the Mexican cultural context, I mean being like, “the person who knows more helps those who don’t;” this is the idea of the teachers there at the Japanese language school, given that they are all Japanese. I think they are accustomed to *senpais* help *kohais*, in terms of “ah, look, it has to be done this way” or “I’ll help you with this type of task” or “the thing goes more this way, and the meaning was this”. That is what I think was the intention, but the reality was that, well, I am going to dare to say it, unfortunately as classic Mexicans, everyone is on their own [Man; Japanese industry in Mexico; Quality and productivity; Nagoya; 2019].

Two final topics under discussion regarding the Japanese courses are the adequacy of the knowledge acquired by Mexicans in terms of intercommunication skills and technical learning, as mentioned above, and the length of classes. On the first question:

In the program as such, I did not know any Japanese, just some words or typical phrases like "*omae wa mou shindeiru*" that were popular at the time. Well, they helped me a lot and I am grateful with them for teaching us Japanese, even if it was a little, before going to Japan. The fact of going to Japan being Mexican and receiving this awareness was very cool, I could say, because I feel I learned enough to be able to defend myself, not in a conversation where you can say "I already

know it all", but enough to not get lost, find my way around, and order food, which are the most important things when you travel abroad. It was a quick course, because you can't learn Japanese in such little time, but I was surprised by the amount of knowledge we were able to absorb at that time. [Man; Japanese industry in Mexico; Quality and productivity; Nagoya; 2019]

On the second:

Yes, we arrived at JICA Center, and we were all living there for two months, you know? We took Japanese language courses. ... I don't really remember how much time of the day we spent studying Japanese, but I remember that schedules were demanding in terms of time. It was pretty much like going to school, from morning to afternoon; and then we had the afternoon off. [Man; Self-employment (art craft); Design; Kyoto; 2009]

Mexican grantees stressed that, despite taking courses, they had difficulties in acquiring a basic set of linguistic skills and an understanding of the grammatical and syntactic rules of Japanese. Their courses were focused more on the repetition of a few sentences (for instance, personal presentation about themselves) than on communicative skills.

Consequently, even one of the most valued aspects of the Program appears to have certain limitations, related to what is taught, and specifically the learning modalities and the extent of language training period. Although there are differences in perceptions, there is a predominant idea among informants that linguistic capital should be reinforced for better social and academic inclusion of Mexican scholarship holders, as pointed out in the following study.

As soon as international students start classes on campus, it becomes tremendously difficult for them to interact with others due to language barriers. Many often find it difficult to communicate with their fellow classmates, instructors and administrators. Others are extremely shy and uncomfortable speaking in English due to their accent. This prevents them from completing many of their daily accomplishments. It becomes challenging for them to make friends, understand lectures and participate in classrooms where the cultural dynamic is very different. They also struggle with reaching out to others as they endure hardships in their new home. Asking for help does not come easily for international students due to the fact they do not have the ability to express their needs and troubles to others because of the language barrier. Language is the key to our basic communication, and it allows us to help and learn from one another so when these individuals are unable to share their experiences and express their needs, they feel trapped in their minds due to lack of expression of their thoughts. (Jibreel, 2015, pp. 9–10)

This is an essential element in the following evaluation of the knowledge acquired during stays

abroad, and of the success of student migration. That is why the duration and aims of language learning are crucial, as many interviewees clearly point out.

### **Discussion: Culture shock: a cross-cutting issue**

Regardless of the JICA Center, where scholarship recipients were housed upon arrival in Japan, and independently of their generational and disciplinary affiliations, the informants praised the collective accommodation during the initial period of their stay, the quality of the support services available at the centers, the kindness of those in charge and their fairness to respond their questions about the functioning of Japanese society and universities. The possibility of maintaining, during the initial weeks of their stay, an exchange with other Mexican or Latin American grantees lessened the impact of culture shock, defined as the result of difficulties in internalizing the diversity of Japanese customs. This culture shock hinders the management of international mobility programs and performance, behavior, and tolerance among persons, when the context of international mobility trajectories is not conducive to transformative communication.

The culture shock was mostly felt once scholarship recipients were distributed among the different HEIs that received them, according to their area of specialization. It was worse when they found themselves isolated from their community of origin and separated from Mexicans or other nationals who initially formed their support group and mitigated their exposure to adversity.

It seems, however, that the collective/individual adaptation difficulties, ever present, have lowered over the half-century of MJTAEP's existence. In recent generations, learning experience and insertion in classroom are less problematic than before. This progressive adaptation resulted from contextual changes (increase of travel capital and linguistic capacities, for instance) because a lot of Mexican grantees have international travelling or training experiences abroad before their stays in Japan and learned at least English as a foreign language, during their studies. It has been facilitated by the willingness and ability of program managers, governments, associations, and HEIs, which adapt their service offers to demands of the grantees, upon their return to Mexico. Both movements derived from integrated diagnoses during and after mobility, but also from the growing openness of national cultures and the strengthening of bicultural interaction, favoring more dynamic interactions and culture dialogue. Indeed, Japanese culture was neither static, nor did it remain intangibly opposed to the national Mexican culture but evolved both in Japan and Mexico, in accordance with an interculturality in movement (Dietz, 2017). Japanese officers of JICA considered also the remarks voiced by Mexican students about the behavior of *sensei* and their lack of sensitivity to Mexican students' needs. They sought, as time went by, to assign younger tutors with greater experience of intercultural dynamics for assessing better teaching processes.

In Mexico, this mutual *rapprochement* has taken root during the past two decades, thanks to the massive arrival of new Japanese migrants to the country; that is, executives and technicians who arrived

for professional reasons and reside in various states of the Mexican Republic, in the center and north of the country. They functioned as *passeurs* (culture intermediaries), in contexts where the opposition between "us" and "them," in both senses, continues to prevail among the actors involved.

Former scholarship recipients of near-past generations also emphasize the benefits and limitations of the dissemination of knowledge made by MJTAEP professors and friends, as facilitating elements of a smooth cultural immersion in Japan. In some cases, they valued the support provided by *Nikkei* colleagues, Mexican descendants of first or second generation Japanese migrant families. They also mentioned other key factors, that prevent suffering from feelings of remoteness and strangeness, such as a previous connection, though minimal, with Japanese culture through the diffusion of products like movies or “anime”, and the consumption of sushi in Japanese restaurants in Mexico.

I am a closet *otaku*. The truth is that was my number one motivation. I grew up buying CDs with 60 *Naruto* chapters; so, I watched that in only four days. That is where my love for Japanese culture began, although it still was not so focused on Japanese culture, but rather just anime-manga culture. As I matured, I became aware of many things (...) What was my motivation? Well, my tastes, since I was a kid. Mexico was focused on this Japanese cartoon culture; we all grew up with *Dragon Ball*, and, even if you didn't want to, we all watched some Japanese cartoons. That's where my curiosity began, and it raised as I read what the MJTAEP was about. [Man; Private university/Japanese robotic industry in Mexico; Quality and productivity; Nagoya; 2016]

During the technical skills acquisition phase, that is, during the formal training cycle, the interviewees indicated several advantages derived from their stay in Japan that helped them to overcome certain negative feelings regarding their individual insertion into Japanese society. They recognized as beneficial for them the possibility of using state-of-the-art technology, expensive, and, occasionally, unavailable in Mexico—See Table 5.

**Table 5. Satisfaction regarding technical courses**

Level	No. of respondents
Very high	64
High	13
Medium	6
Low	7
Very low	15
No response	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>

Source: Online survey, 2021

They valued the fact that they were able to develop a concrete research proposal, selected by themselves, that could be applied upon their return to Mexico. They also appreciated the support provided by Japanese teachers to fulfill their material needs (use of machines, mainly) before the university administration, the availability of their Japanese group mates and the disposition to explain how and when to use high technology instruments.

The experience was positive. The course is not so much about work in the classroom, but about the development of a project; so, one gets there with a proposal ... The university chooses the laboratories according to one's background and interests. In that sense, the work path is open. At least in my lab, there were fixed schedules and things like that. Obviously, there was an expectation for me not to go to the lab and participate in the seminars; but, as such, they were not courses, it was more about taking the project proposal and developing it. Then, coincidentally, when I had just arrived, there was a call for a congress. My advisor urged me to send a paper to be published, and it immediately became my objective: to send the proposal and write the document. [Man; International enterprise in Mexico (Australian); Information Science; Chiba; 2016]

Nevertheless, the interviewees described the academic relationships between students and their *sensei* as distant, ceremonious, or authoritarian. While several noted that this situation had led them to strengthen their capacities for autonomy and independent task planning, according to the demands and their sense of responsibility, others suffered from solitude, both inside and outside university—See Table 6.

On the other hand, they did not express an unanimously positive assessment of their integration into Japanese society. Many noted that it was hard to make Japanese friends over a long-term period, although some of them mentioned solutions, like seeking friends outside the university, in coffee shops for instance. They mentioned, as another alternative, conversation clubs in Spanish and Japanese, or circles of Japanese graduates and professionals with international experience.

In sum, although there was progress in the mutual understanding of the differences in the ways of being and doing things, both on the part of Mexicans and Japanese, maintenance of lasting personal and professional ties was perceived as problematic. Japanese linguistic proficiency, for personal or academic purposes, is another sensitive issue since it did not allow the acquisition of sufficient linguistic knowledge for fluent exchanges due to short duration of the stay.

Despite those difficulties, many interviewees noted that Japanese teachers had taught them knowledge and skills, as well as they accelerated their evolution as human beings and responsible citizens. This perception counterbalances a negative recollection about the, sometimes-tense, process of incorporation into Japanese society.

The profile/interests of the fellows (young professionals more than students) were constantly centered on the acquisition of both hard and soft skills (intercultural values/habits), at both personal and



collective levels. Many respondents felt that the support received, in Mexico, from Japanese and Mexican program officers, after they returned to Mexico, was insufficient. They frequently express disappointment due to the low professional recognition of their efforts and learnings. They appreciate the role of networks and associations such as ASEMEJA and Mexican Association of Ex Alumni (Asociación mexicana de ex becarios [AMEJ]), as spaces for re-integration. However, they believe that these grounded initiatives should be supported and financed through business and third-party participation in their operation, in accordance with a diversification strategy of the partners involved in the management of a complicated post-mobility stage.

**Table 6. Integration of Mexican Grantees of MJTAEP in Japanese society**

Attitude / level of integration	Absolutely	Moderately	Not much	I didn't participate at all	Not applicable	Un-answered box
I actively interacted with the family in the house where I was staying	10	8	5	2	70	11
I actively interacted with other residents of the place where I was staying	58	21	14	2	8	3
I actively interacted with Mexican friends	78	13	4	1	2	8
I actively interacted with Japanese friends	47	36	18	1	2	2
I actively interacted with Nikkei friends	14	20	18	14	29	11
Others	33	23	15	2	23	10

Source: Online survey and interviews, 2021

## Concluding remarks

Interculturality as a comprehensive (although uncertain) paradigm related to the adaptation of international students/professionals to their host places, in an outbound mobility context, is different from acculturation. It is referred to as a momentary adjustment process, during a short- or medium-term sojourn abroad, with eventual long-term consequences. It is articulated with the concept of culture shock as a barrier or a driver to effective learning and social integration.

The evaluation project about the impact of MJTAEP on bilateral cooperation and on the professional and personal trajectories of individuals suggests that it is necessary to systematically document its procedures and results, in terms of individual benefits and general fulfillment of objectives, at political or diplomatic levels. Both the respondents to survey and interviewees, despite the representativeness biases inherent to their sampling methods, identify some practices, both virtuous and negative, linked to interculturality as an essential component for an integrative migration. They recognized that the bodies in charge of their coordination tried to respond to the demands expressed by the grantees in the forums in which they participated. Recent adjustments made by Japanese cooperation agencies in Mexico and Latin America in accordance with the project Towards a New Solidarity<sup>9</sup> may offer additional ways out of the dysfunctions identified.

Another pending issue will be to strengthen the presence of some priority groups for MJTAEP, which can be useful to lessen the arrival difficulties to Japan. It is important to promote the role of several people as cultural and linguistic intermediaries for the rest of the Mexican scholarship recipients, in a context in which JICA stated that it would reinforce its support to the *Nikkei*.

In this perspective, some suggestions to remove barriers and to optimize the program operation are:

- Evaluate current articulations between interests of individuals/institutions and the rules or mechanisms of the Program.
- Enable the role and resources of facilitators during the adaptation process of Mexican grantees to Japan.
- Increase the participation of current and former fellows of MJTAEP in its redefinition and adjustments.
- Reinforce the existing networks of alumni, to identify quickly malfunctions and good practices, inside Program and among stakeholders.

As noted above, MJTAEP is an evolving program within a broader portfolio of bilateral cooperation. In this perspective, it would be necessary to analyze its articulations with other measures, such as knowledge co-creation, to optimize its results. It would be important to define a communication strategy to promote it to a larger number of professionals (mainly graduates of technological institutes

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jica.go.jp/english/publications/reports/annual/2020/index.html>

and higher education) and to socially propagate the expertise mobilized by its beneficiaries.

Finally, it should be noted that the temporary suspension of physical grantee exchanges (which are costly) in 2020 because of Covid-19, the closing of borders in Japan, and their subsequent resumption during 2021 in a mixed modality (virtual and/or presential), modified some historical features of this social engineering project, from a perspective of technological transnationalization rather than spatial migration. They potentially put into question its intercultural components, linked to a temporary immersion in a society other than that of origin, and lead to questions about the durability of several strengths of the program. According to the 2022 call for proposals, MJTAEP will restart activities in a hybrid way, with shorter stays in Japan, an intensive use of distance education as well as the use of English as a global language of communication. A final pending issue will be to monitor the effects of these decisions on intercultural aspects and on the advantages associated with international mobility.

**Acknowledgement:** We thank to the support provided by the Fund for Promotion of International Research, KAKENHI, Japan (Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research) to the bilateral research project coordinated by Mg. Kyoko Tanaka (Nagoya University, Japan). The Japanese team is integrated by Dr. Hoshino Akinari, Dr. Francis Peddie (Nagoya University) Dr. Kazuyasu Ochiai (Hitotsubashi University), and Dr. Yukiko Shimmi (Tohoku University). The Mexican academic team includes Dr. Sylvie Didou Aupetit (coordinator), Center for Research and Advanced Studies (Cinvestav) and UNESCO Chair on Higher Education and Globalisation, Dr. Juan José Ramírez Bonilla, El Colegio de Mexico (Colmex), and Mg. Ana Fernanda Fraga Salgado, Ministry of Public Education, in charge of the survey's online application, interviews codification and translation. Thanks to Aline Palma for the text edition and to Mg. Erika Sanchez for the initial revision of translation.

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