Presentation by Anna Schrade (Lecturer, Kobe University), 27 January 2017

Presentation title: **Japanese students: as good as their fame?**

Summary

This presentation focused on the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese high school students in international comparison. The presenter, Anna Schrade, Lecturer at Kobe University, led the audience through her presentation, explaining what differences between Japanese and foreign students she has noticed during her three years at Kobe University.

She contrasted students’ different skills (e.g. being good as functioning as a team, while being unskilled at teamwork) and proposed ideas on how to improve their yet undeveloped skills.

The presenter pointed out seven weaknesses amongst Japanese students:

1. Participating in activities when there is no clear, direct benefit
2. Contributing by sharing their opinions
3. Evaluating and merging ideas
4. Finding creative solutions
5. Speaking up in class, in front of others
6. Doing teamwork
7. Enjoying studying, and finding a passion for their subject

The last part of the presentation aimed at providing some ideas on how to help high school students develop new skills, amongst all analytical skills, critical thinking skills, teamwork skills, communicative skills, efficiency, creativity, and curiosity. The main focus thereby was on analytical and critical skills, as this is an area that is hugely underdeveloped amongst Japanese students. Using Bloom’s Taxonomy, Anna showed the audience that what Japanese education is focusing on, namely remembering (memorising) and understanding, is actually the lowest level of knowledge. Pointing out that in our current information society, where the Internet provides unlimited information, skills such as memorising have become close to redundant, the presenter urged the audience to start focusing on more advanced skills and levels of knowledge. These are applying knowledge, analysing it, evaluating information, and creating new knowledge, as depicted in Bloom’s Taxonomy.

In order for Japanese students to compete successfully on a global stage, they need to learn how to evaluate information, apply knowledge, and create new ideas already at school, so the presentation. Anna thus asked the teachers to start classes that foster the development of such higher steps of knowledge, such as changing tasks that focus on memorising information to lessons requiring summarising information, analysing the content, evaluating it, and creating new ideas. For students to improve their analytical thinking, teachers should encourage them to find the reasons, for example by asking them follow-up questions such as ‘why is this?’ (rationale) or ‘so what?’ (implication). This helps them reason about the rationale and impact of diverse decisions and developments, so the presentation. Teachers can help students be able to understand general implications or reasoning by teaching them how to make (informed) guesses or hypotheses, deducting from what they already know and applying it to a different context. In short, Anna hoped that Japanese schools would implement a climate where critical engagement is welcome, and where students cannot only ask questions, but can also express and explain their opinions freely. In the long term, this will help students to be able to question standard assumptions and to think critically and independently. Being able to create new thoughts, as well as to merge different ideas, Japanese students will gain highly important skills from which not only they themselves benefit, but also their teachers and future employers.

The session ended with a short Q&A session and debate on the applicability of the ideas and arguments presented by Anna Schrade.