

Looking for Parallels

Creating Task Based Project Ideas from Regional Policy Planning Studies of European Union Countries

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Abstract

This article is divided into two parts: (1) describing some ways European countries have tackled regional policy planning as a nation state and a member of the European Union (EU). (2) Using this research to design task-based lesson ideas for students of regional policy studies. The purpose of this article is to highlight some areas of comparison between regional policy planning within the European countries and within Japan in order to uncover some interesting topic areas for teachers to design lessons in English. This will cover the following:

- I . A brief outline of the European Union
- II . Regional policy planning objectives from the European Commission
- III . Examples of regional policy planning at state level by individual countries
- IV . Comparisons with Japanese regional planning
- V . A short review of the task-based analysis (TBL) teaching method
- VI . Project ideas for students studying regional development
- VII . Optimal teaching environments and delivery approaches for the teaching material
- VIII . Conclusion - A case for research through travel

I . A brief outline of the European Union (EU)

The European Union's formulation is an on-going process and grew from a post-second world war need to create lasting peace and stability among previously warring nations. Firstly, this was done along economic lines with increased free trade areas in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, principally in the coal and steel markets. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome created the European Economic Community (EEC). Further social integration was to follow in the 1960s with cultural barriers being broken down through the expansion of media

distribution networks. At this time, popular music, popular cinema and new definitions of young people as teenagers meant new characteristics were not necessarily drawn from nationally formulated notions of identity. As the 1970s progressed, right-wing fascist governments in Europe had all but disappeared and poorer regions of Europe were starting to have a voice. The first EU regional policy planning initiatives were introduced in the latter part of the decade. This was designed to create jobs and infrastructure and to build stronger regional economies as energy shortages and middle-eastern war grew.

As more countries saw the benefit of greater European integration and joined the EU so the Single European Act was created in 1986 to help solve problems from the growing single market. One effect of closer trade ties meant a hardening of trade union resolve to protect workers' rights. Key countries at this time were the union activists in Poland, under the solidarity movement and the Miner's unions of the United Kingdom. Also around this time the European Commission was created and individual countries could vote for representatives to sit in a fledging form of the European Parliament. By 1993, the single market had been completed and as the Berlin Wall had collapsed at the end of the previous decade, even more countries, chiefly from the east of Europe wanted to join. In 1995, the 'Schengen act' was passed to allow free movement of people across borders without passport checks. Cultural integration and an increased chance to study for students strengthen the social ties between EU countries. Major cities across the EU had started to reflect this new integration through the mixture of nationalities in its populations.

The formulation of the modern European Union in 1990s became ratified in the early 2000s under the Three Pillar System, this abolished the previous treaties such as the Treaty of Rome. Now, economic integration was combined with common foreign and security policies, a police and judicial system and widening rights for people as European citizens as well as national citizens.

What effect did this have on countries as nation states and the development of regions within countries?

II . Regional policy planning objectives from the European Commission

As the European Union has grown so has its range and powers. We have seen the economic cooperation between countries grew to include social and judicial collaboration. However, fundamentally the EU interconnectedness remains largely economic. Therefore, as Wostner and Slander (2009) point out, policies to assist and develop regions within the EU are centred on funds for economic investment, raising local Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and solving poverty through increasing employment rather than offering aid. This is an important point for students to remember if studying this area in that EU development policies are broadly economic and centralised funds are seen as an investment rather than financial support or benefits. This can be explained by calculating that the average GDP of the EU as a whole falls every time a new country joins the EU as a full member because new countries are typically poorer.

The EU categorizes its regional development funding plan into three areas: Convergence — solidarity among regions, Regional competitiveness and employment, and European territorial cooperation. Convergence refers to the reduction of economic disparities between rich and poor regions within the EU. Regional competitiveness and employment plans are designed to make uncompetitive regions more attractive for investments. European territorial cooperation includes funding for shared management of natural resources, risk protection, improving transport links, creating networks of universities, and research institutes. However, as the European commission states in its own publications, this third area of funding is by far the smallest of the three parts of EU regional policy.

The EU commission provides a series of other funds to help regional development; principally these are 'Structural Funds' - the European Social Fund (ESF), 'Cohesion funds'¹ mainly for newer EU member countries to stabilize their economies. Also the EU provides much financial assistance to farmers and other agri-businesses through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This article will focus on the largest of these funds, the European Regional Development Fund(ERDF) and its impact on regional development. This article will also refer to these funds in relation to Japanese regional policy initiatives, such as, the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program (FILP).

As the largest fund, the ERDF has a budget of 201 billion euros and is dispensed over all EU member countries depending on the effectiveness of bidding by particular regions. This funding

is spread over a cycle of seven years, currently 2007-2013. The amount of money given in development aid varies and, according to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, the United Kingdom receives 3.3 million euros of ERDF funds².

The three areas covered by the fund in detail are:

Convergence objectives: research and technological development (RTD); innovation and entrepreneurship, information society, environment, risk prevention, tourism, culture, transport, energy, education, and health.

Regional Competitiveness and Employment objectives: strengthening regional capacities for research and technological development, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship and strengthening financial engineering notably for companies involved in knowledge-based economies; cleaning up polluted areas, boosting energy efficiency, promoting clean public transport within towns, and preventing and limiting natural and technological risks; having access to transport and telecommunications services of general economic interest.

European Territorial Cooperation objectives: Development of economic and social cross-border activities; establishment and development of transnational cooperation, including bilateral cooperation between maritime regions; increasing the efficiency of regional policy through interregional promotion and cooperation, networking and exchanging experiences between regional and local authorities.

III. Examples of regional policy planning by individual countries

Let's look at examples of regional policy planning with reference to two countries: Finland and Greece. These countries joined the EU in 1995 and 1981 respectively; and, according to the World Bank, had a roughly commensurate GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by 2000 of 5.32% and 4.48% respectively³. As we will see, the GDP of these two countries had become vastly different by 2011.

Markku Sotarauta from the University of Finland comments in his article 'The role of regional development officers in Finland' that the key to successful regional development is to elect powerful regional representatives who understand the region well; that they are typically born in the region or have a strong affinity to the region and can relate how a region operates back to

a central government funding program and a European Union funded program. He stated that:

This is particularly true in a more self-reliance-oriented regional development context in which the central idea is to help the regions to help themselves instead of controlling from the top or circulating a one-size-fits-all model to the regions of Europe. Success in such development work depends partly on existing resources, but equally on the abilities of regions (or on those of their key players) to create and attract new resources, to mobilize collective action and to pool existing resources. Therefore, how things actually happen emerges as an important question in addition to the questions of what and why. (Markku Sotarauta 2010).

This strong local representation of regional interests helped to strengthen Finnish regional claims on ERDF money and Finland exports such as its Nokia mobile phones were able to export at a competitive price by the time Finland joined the EU as a full member. Ms Sinikka Salo, an executive at the Bank of Finland commented, in the article 'Finland — from a crisis to a successful member of the EU and EMU', that before joining the EU in 1995, Finland had adjusted its currency in line with the Europe Central Bank rate and within five years was able to switch over to using the Euro currency without much lost in value. Thus, exporting goods in line with Germany and its new internationalization was successful in raising its GDP significantly faster than in Greece.

Finland has allocated most of its ERDF money to research and development of new industries and technologies, particularly in the electronics and alternative energy sectors. According to an EU report on innovation in 2013, Finland is in the top four EU countries in terms of research and development spending at €862, over half of the budget. This is out of a total of 27 EU members.

However, Elias Einiö in his article 'R&D Subsidies and Company Performance: Evidence from Geographic Variation in Government Funding Based on the ERDF Population-Density Rule', does point out that some of the rules of the ERDF tend to target low population density areas as a priority for funding over more populated areas however more in need the more densely populated areas may be.

The successes of correctly implemented regional development programs helped to form a significant part of Finland's GDP, along with national industrial production, global exports, a

responsible banking sector and government investment. As well as promoting national cohesion and the participation of citizens in a countries decision making processes. Eleven years on from the parity of GDP growth between Finland and Greece, by 2011 the difference in growth rates between the two countries stood at 9.84 % , according to the World Bank.⁴ Finland's economy remained one of the few European countries to keep a triple A rating from Moody's, a corporation that supplies financial analysis on countries' economies and stock market performance.

The story of Greece is a marked contrast to that of Finland. Rather than having a currency that was already close to the value of the Euro before joining the single currency, Greece's prices and wages rose sharply. Moreover, Greece's public spending was far higher than the 3 % of GDP needed to join the new currency, yet many people blame the Greek government and not the people of Greece for hiding the amount of debt Greece actually had.

The role of the European Union and other organisations towards Greece since the late 2000s has been one of bailing out the Greek economy rather than supporting its regional development. Although, money has been loaned to Greece to pay some of its creditors, these creditors and investors have written off large amounts of Greece's debt. The current total of loans arranged to help Greece is €270 billion. In return for this support, the European Union is asking for large scale restructuring of the public sector, cuts in spending, tax rises and reforms in labour laws. This major shift in austerity has weakened the Greek economy and has worked in the opposite way to which the foundations of the EU system were supposed to operate. Without economic growth, the Greek government cannot boost its own tax revenues and so has to rely on aid to pay its loans.

Helen Caraveli points out in her article 'Regional development may be the answer to the austerity vs. growth dilemma in Greece', the need to develop regionals within countries with acute structural problems, in the case of Greece, and less severely in Finland, can help countries to unite, particularly in a time of crisis. She goes on to say that if a country feels marginalized during a crisis, as did Greece after the 2008 global stock market crash and for years afterwards, so regionals within the country that are under-developed feel a compounded effect of being marginalized from their own central government and the wider world. She cites centralized mismanagement of agricultural policy and a neglect of regional farm production over cheaper food imports as a reason why regional economies suffered as the Greek debt bail-out plans

introduced austerity on a scale never experienced before joining the EU.

Michalis Chrysochoidis, a Greek politician and member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement echoes the sentiments of Markku Sotarauta in calling for regional development to reflect regional needs over centralised project planning that currently ties up €14 billion in failed developments. He cites youth unemployment as a key local need in all regionals of Greece, particularly in the agricultural areas. As the credit crunch aftermath of the 2008 global crash continues to affect Greece, so the lack of regional funding by the Greek government has meant otherwise healthy businesses have failed or have stopped all together. In 2011, Chrysochoidis called on rapid and immediate European Union relief funding for small businesses, Danuta Hübner, chairperson of the European Parliament's Regional Development Committee agreed with Chrysochoidis that "local performance" was crucial to Greece and the development goals for the future.

In relation to Finland, Greece and the ERDF initiatives, how has Japan tried to tackle its problems of regional development?

IV. Comparisons with Japanese regional planning

Unlike the EU, Japan is not part of an 'Asian Union' and has not participated heavily in free-trade agreements with other countries in Asia. Although Japan does monitor and contribute to organisations such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), a geo-political and economic alliance between Southeast Asian Nations and the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP) - a free trade agreement initiative involving countries spanning Asia and across the Pacific to the USA and South America. Japan is not committed any formal agreements on trade with other countries and no pan-Asia organization has emerged on the scale and scope of the European Union.

Hence, regional development plans and assistance come almost exclusively from inside Japan.

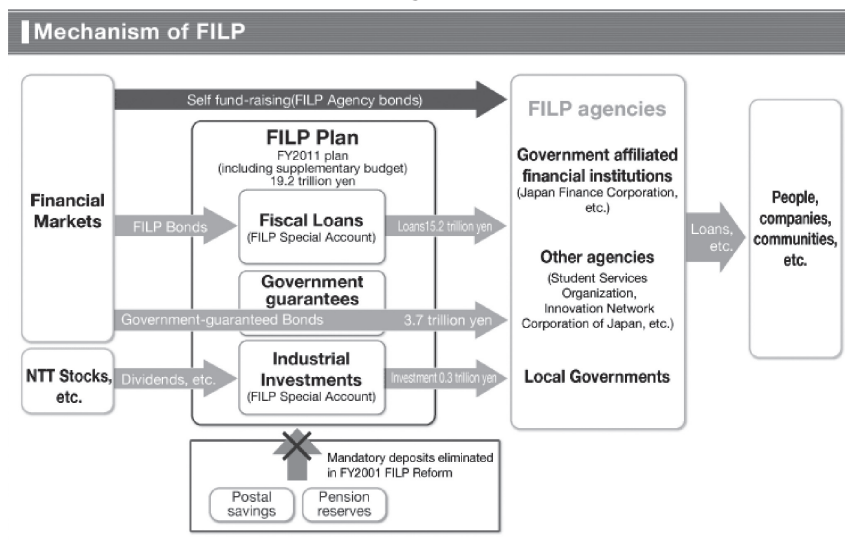
As European regional development is more closely linked with local governments, national government and, in the case of the EU, supra-national governments, so Japan's regional development programmes are tied more closely to corporations involvement and Government-backed investment generated largely from capital markets. Therefore, the presence of private investment and ownership in Schools, Universities, Hospitals, Railways, Construction,

Telecommunications, Postal services and Housing is on a larger scale than throughout the 'Euro-Zone'. Local government public investment exists in collaboration with government affiliated financial institutions, consortiums and regional development agencies. Most notably, The Japan Center for Regional Development (JCRD), The Japan Regional Development Corporation (JRDC), The Innovation Network Corporation of Japan (INCJ), The Organization for Small & Medium Enterprises and Regional Innovation (SME), The Urban Renaissance Agency (UR).

Rather than direct investment by local authorities or EU funds, the Japanese form of regional aid is merely managed by the government through programs such as the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program (FILP). This program offers support to regional communities, services, large-scale construction and small to middle sized businesses through long-term loans raised on bond and equity markets and distributed through local governments, agencies and consortiums, some of which are listed above.

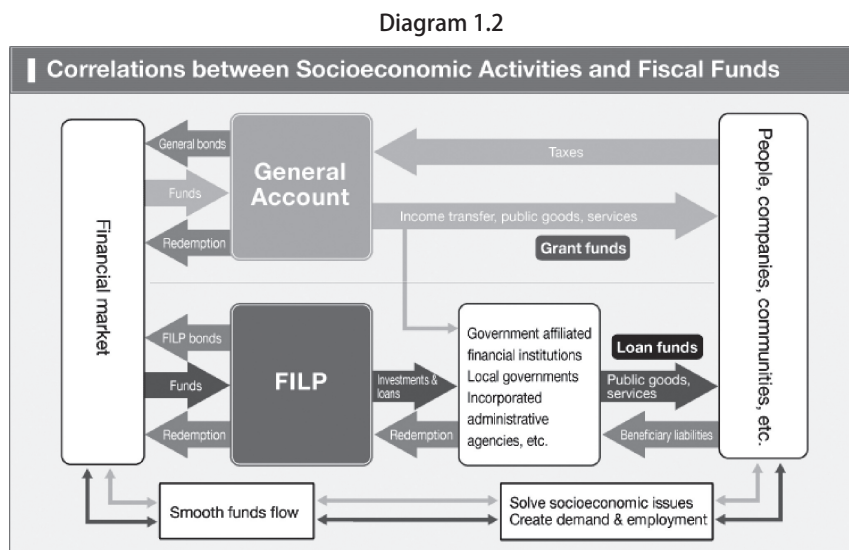
In diagram 1.1, we can see how the flow of investment from financial markets to the FILP plan initiatives and then on to FILP agencies that provide the direct investment for people, companies and communities. It is interesting to note that in contrast to the EDRF programs backed by the EU commission, as an elected body, the Japanese government only partial guarantees funds raised in the FILP, less than half of the total. Those bonds guaranteed by the government are known as Zaito Bonds, those not guaranteed are known as Zaito Institution Bonds. It is clear that

Diagram 1.1



the private sector takes a much bigger role in the allocation of funds and to who they are distributed. Similarly, unlike an EU backed loan, FILP loans are partly private investments which may require more immediate re-payment; or else a transfer of management to a more pro-dividend mindful regulator.

Diagram 1.2 shows the correlation between the allocation of funding and the outflows of capital back to the financiers. These outflows are delivered back in the form of taxes, liabilities and if successful in the demand for more productivity and the creation of demand and employment.



We can say correspondingly, that programs such as FILP in Japan do relate to the EDRF concepts of regional development through economic growth and self-sufficiency and the formation of stronger services and infrastructure. However, the strong sense of regionalism present in the Finnish approach to regional development planning as regards local involvement and decision making as a citizen level does not seem to be as possible under the Japanese system of FILP. This is largely because local government involvement forms only part of the allocation process of funding as shown in diagram 1.1⁵.

How then can we take such analysis of the European and Japanese systems of regional development and design interesting and stimulating lesson plans for students of regional development? One notable method to do this would be to use the teaching method of task-based analysis. This technique is summarised in the next section and then is followed by examples of

how to structure tasks for regional development students.

V. A short review of the task-based analysis (TBL) teaching method

Willis and Willis in their book 'Doing Task-Based Learning' (2007), describes a way of teaching English and applied English for a special purpose through employing tasks based on a real-life situation but without a pre-prepared script to memorize. Students must think about how to complete the task with a set of pre-taught vocabulary, and perhaps a few grammatical phrases, but without any pre-ordering to the production of the language. For our examples, this would centre on vocabulary and phrases given in the class and previous knowledge of concepts in regional development learnt in other classes.

The goal of completing the task will inevitably produce situations in which students have to co-operate, explain, and query decisions. These interactions are where Willis describes the real 'consciousness raising' of the language use takes place. Students will see how their application of vocabulary and phrases into sentences can get a result or move the task on to a next stage. The quality of the language production should not be penalised during the task, as long as the target language is being used. It should be possible to explain and feedback to students after the task is completed. Indeed, this approach does not contradict the lecturing and repetitive reinforcement teaching methods, moreover, TBL provides a space for freedom to speak in communication classes that might be separate from learning just grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, this approach could fit into the current Japanese education system.

VI. Project ideas for students studying regional development

This section will detail four areas in which students can study aspects of regional development in Europe and relate the research to examples in Japan. The instruction language for these ideas will be expected to be in English, therefore, special attention and consideration will be given to students' limits in English speaking and writing abilities. The topics listed below can be taught discreetly or part of a complete program as they interconnect. The areas discussed here will be:

1. The formation and expansion of the EU
2. Role-play regional bidding competition for EU funding
3. A comparison between EU funding bodies and Japanese funding bodies

4. A hypothetical model of an Asian Union of countries with reference to the EU model

1. The formation and expansion of the EU

This topic idea is useful for teaching the history and relationship of the countries that make up the European Union. For Japanese students, basic European geography is a good place to start as it might be an area unfamiliar to some. The teacher can direct the students to research certain areas such as the original post-war foundation of the EEC and the free trade agreements. This point can be related to Japan's involvement in free-trade agreements. Then further research can be done on a timeline basis by following how and why countries came to join the EU and under which circumstances their admission was allowed. The teacher could set a time limit for this research and set concept check questions to see what the students have discovered. If the class is large then individual groups could form a seminar group and present their findings to the teacher, all in English. This topic idea would utilize all the space as details in the section below entitled 'Optimal teaching environments and delivery approaches for the teaching material'.

Another approach in this area would be for students to outline various branches of the union and the differences between the European Commission and the European Council. Student could study how each organisation operates and in which language business is done. At the start of this topic questions can be given to students to uncover the differences and scope of the powers specified under each branch of the institution. Although this will be a broad topic, here there is scope for students to study about local, national and EU laws as it may affect individual citizens.

2. Role-play regional bidding competition for EU funding

This topic area will involve preparing a role-play scenario in which students are given different identities to adopt. The teacher can vary the approach but broadly this would entail students understanding the structure of the European Regional Development Fund(ERDF) in some detail, then in groups given a role to play as a region of a country, a middle-sized business or a public project, in order to bid for a limited amount of money allocated to the most successful presentation. This idea can be carried out in different ways depending on the level of research the students need to do into their role and how the result will be judged.

The students are instructed to plan a bid and offer researched reasons why their offer will be the most beneficial to stimulating the region, improve the quality of life for the citizens of the region and be sustainable for the future growth of the region. The teacher can also grade on the level of

English and the professionalism of the presentation. A previous lesson on presentation techniques will be useful and even essential for students to complete this task successfully.

3. A comparison between EU funding bodies and Japanese funding bodies

As mentioned above, the funding of regional development projects in Japan is slightly different than within the European Union. Rather than money paid into the European Union funds by member states, Japanese regional development funds are raised in a mixture of ways involving money made from trading on financial markets and distributed through a number of government and non-government agencies. With pre-taught knowledge and case studies of individual countries within the European Union students could choose a region around Japan, one that may be familiar to the student or student group and analyse the ways in which regional development is funded. Depending on the year of study and level of the student's English, the teacher could provide prepared material, Internet searches and focus questions for the student or study group to focus on. If a seminar or meeting table is available in the PC or general classroom, the teacher can timetable regular team meetings with each group to check the progress and offer some guidance. The results could be written up or presented as a project.

4. A hypothetical model of an Asian Union of countries with reference to the EU model

This topic focuses on Japan as a member of the Asia-pacific region and not just as a separate country. The concept of this task is to formulate a model of an Asian Union through a case study of the European model. This is a greater challenge for students or a study group because the idea of an Asian Union might seem unthinkable to many students. However, this is why the challenge is potentially interesting, especially if the goal is to provide some answers to the questions of why or why it is not possible to form a closer economic and social bond with Japan's closest neighbours.

Research into the social history as well as the political history of both regions of Europe and Asia would be required here with useful research directions and monitoring from the teacher. Also, students should be encouraged to think forward and to the present for answers in modern life and in current societies of the Asia-pacific region. Concepts of self and identity could help to shape a view of Asia that is more than just historical relationships. Relating present day social activities to the past events in European history would be useful here. For example, concepts of Pan-European nationalism or a personal identification with Europe as a citizen could be researched in comparison with what cultural similarities and differences exist among Asia-Pacific

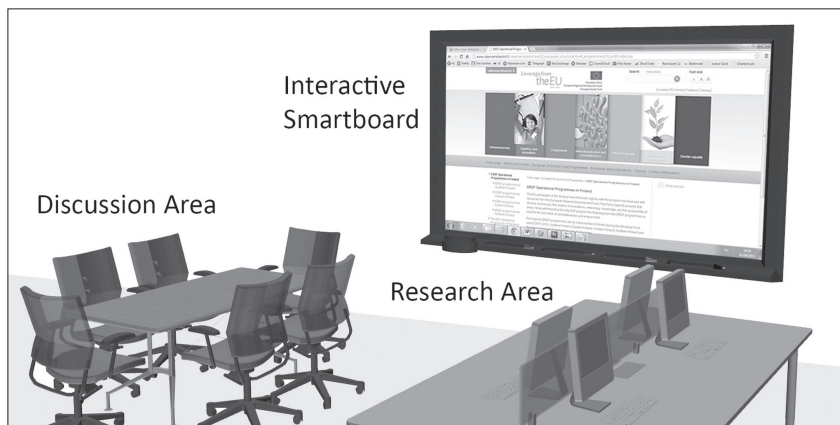
citizens. Correspondingly, as mentioned above, to what extent did the popular culture, film, television or music play in the reunification of some European nations and how can that be related to the wide-spread trend in social media use by the younger generations in all developed countries.

VII. Optimal teaching environments and delivery approaches for the teaching material

As we have seen from the types of activities students can approach the study of regional development with the application of task based analysis techniques, it is important for students to have access to the optimal study space and equipment. This section will detail an optimal set-up for teaching whilst bearing in mind that some institutions may not have the budget or space to deliver exactly the activity in the description below.

For task-based analysis to work effectively, students need to be involved in two interrelated environments. In diagram 2.1 below, these spaces are labels: the discussion area and the research area. These are where the majority of the tasks will be planned and executed. The teacher's input will be restricted to briefing sessions at the start and intermittently throughout the lesson. In this set-up the students will be able to plan their task as a group in the discussion area and research information on PCs in the research area. This allows students the flexibility to work individually for a time or in smaller groups within a team and discuss their results in an iterative process throughout the task. The diagram shows that as well as an open plan desk arrangement for the discussion area, the research area is also open planned for discussion adjacent to and opposite each PC station.

Diagram 2.1



The teacher's role as observer can be accentuated if there is an interactive smart board with a Computer-Assisted Language Lab system, such as Calabo, to help the teacher monitor the research done by watching all the PC screens at any one time. If possible, each group undertaking the task should have access to both a discussion area and a research area.

This room design has the feel of an open plan office and although it may not be possible in all institutions, these ideas of a work space and research space are becoming ever more conceivable. With the increase in Internet bandwidths and wireless internet routers, the potential for hand-held device usage in the traditional classroom can turn this space into a research centre.

However, one key factor in some Japanese universities and colleges is the issue of Internet access and privacy. As Mizutani, Dorsey and Moor point out in their article 'The internet and Japanese conception of privacy' (2004) notions of openness and the display of opinions and information are not as visceral in Japan as in western countries; restrictions on the display of public information are more prevalent in Japan than they are elsewhere.

These restrictions have manifested themselves in blocking Internet sites, social media, photographic images, audio visual material, and crucially online document transfer and download. For a teaching environment such as the one described above, free and comprehensive access to all forms of Internet publication would benefit the task activities. It would be incumbent on the teacher to explain that certain rules of behaviour and practice were expected at all times from the study groups and any misuse of the access they have would result in a downgrading of work and possible further action.

VIII. Conclusion - A case for research through travel

The central focus for students following this approach to regional development studies is to look for parallels across countries and across continents. Japan is, reluctantly, planning to widen its integration into the global community - economically through trade talks; financially through increases in bond issuance; socio-economically through the acceptance of more migrant labour; and socially through the use of social media network internet communication. Therefore, the opportunity for students to increase their understanding of other countries and their regions has never been greater. This, however, is at odds with a recent report by The Japan Youth Research Institute that states that a lack of confidence in speaking foreign languages and a very

comfortable home environment has meant that less than half of Japanese young people are interested in working and studying abroad.

Nevertheless, research into the comparison between Japanese regional development and that implemented in EU countries would be invaluable for the understanding of the effects of increased globalization on Japanese life. An overseas research trip to Finland and Greece, as well as, to regions around Japan could form the basis for important thesis work at 4th grade undergraduate level or at post-graduate level. Cost notwithstanding, students could benefit from a detailed plan of visits to important areas in both the capital cities of the two countries and the regions affected by regional funding policies or the lack of.

If successful, a regular planned study program based on this model and the topic areas discussed in the section above – ‘Project ideas for students studying regional development’ could be applied to trips to other countries and regions around an increasing integrated world.

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Endnotes

- 1 The Cohesion Fund is schedule to end in 2013
- 2 House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee – 2nd Report 2012-2013
- 3 World Bank July 12, 2013
- 4 World Bank July 12, 2013
- 5 A recent example of the Takasaki University of Economics in Gunma changing its status from a publicly funded university to a partially privatised entity is a shift away from its ownership by and for the local region to one in part beholden to private investors and consortiums.

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