A Firsthand Examination of Overseas Universities and Research Institutions:  
Current Issues in Japanese Education and Japanese Studies in Belgium

Shino Arisawa, Special Researcher  
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From November 16th to 21st, 2009, I had the occasion to travel to Belgium and visit universities offering Japanese language and Japanese Studies courses. Whilst there, I was able to conduct a series of interviews with the educators in charge and the students. This report utilizes the information obtained through the aforementioned field research to summarize current issues in Japanese language, Japanese education, and related research in Belgium.

Social Background

Belgium can be broadly divided into two cultural spheres. The community in the northern area speaks Dutch, while and the population in the southern region speaks French. However, including the community in the southeastern area, which speaks German, gives the country three different major linguistic groups. Japanese language education in the Dutch-speaking community has had a much longer history compared with the situation in the two other linguistic groups.

The first university-level Japanese language education courses were inaugurated at Ghent University (Dutch language community) in 1958, as part of the Institute for Oriental, Slavonic and African Studies, with the official employment of full-time Japanese Studies faculty. In the 1980s, when public interest in Japan grew high, there was emphasis placed on high school level Japanese language education. At that time, language schools began to offer Japanese, and the population studying the language increased throughout the general private sector, as well.

Starting in 1990, organizations offering Japanese courses began to the increase, but when the economy saw a downturn around the turn of the millennium, in 2000, interest in the Chinese language began to grow stronger and the number of Japanese language learners experienced a bit of a decrease. However, since 2004, the number of Japanese language learners has once again mushroomed. Due to the interest in manga and anime in the youth culture, the trend is that the average age of these Japanese language learners tends to be even younger than before.

Another contributing factor to the recent augmented interest in Japanese study is the fact that the number of Japanese nationals living in Belgium has increased over the past several years. With a greater number of Japanese living in the country, there are now organizations such as The Japan Society, The Japan-Belgium Society, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Japanese schools, and the cultural center at the Japanese Embassy, which are all advancing the overall understanding of Japan, holding a variety of events and providing a good deal of public information.
The only universities currently offering degrees in Japanese Studies are the Catholic University of Leuven, which also serves the Dutch-speaking community, and Ghent University. While none of the French-speaking universities award degrees in Japanese, it is possible to take elective courses in Japanese language and Japanese Studies at the University of Liège and the University of Mons-Hainaut.

Below, I offer an overview of special features and course descriptions in Japanese language and Japan Studies at institutions I have visited: The Catholic University of Leuven, Ghent University, and the University of Liège. I then discuss what these three schools have in common.

**Catholic University of Leuven**

The Catholic University of Leuven is the largest comprehensive university in the country. Japan Studies at this university began as one area of concentration in the Far Eastern Studies department, in 1932, but Modern Japanese Language courses were not established until 1963. Later, Japanese and Japan Studies found their places as parts of the Oriental Studies program. In 1986, for the first time, an independent Japanese Studies major was given its own section in the literature school of the Department of Oriental and Slavonic Studies. Over the past few years, the number of Japanese majors has increased by about 30% per year. In 2009, there were 120 students admitted to the program.

**Degrees Conferred**
B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

**Courses Offered**
Japanese Language:
Theory; Grammar, Exercises

**Full-Time Faculty**
Department Chairman: Professor Dr. Willy Vande Walle (History of Japan’s External Relations)
Professor: Paul Van De Meerssche (International Relations)
Professor: Dimitri Vanoverbeke (Japanese History)
Head Japanese Language Instructor: Naoko Sakurai (Japanese Legal Sociology)
Seven lecturers, four of whom are Japanese
Four researchers who also engage in teaching

Head Professor Vande Walle is the number one authority on Japan research in Europe. In 2006, he was a recipient of the “Order of the Rising Sun” award that is conferred upon foreign nationals by the Japanese government. He is responsible for the establishment of the Japanese Studies major at the Catholic University of Leuven. Ms. Sakurai, the head Japanese instructor, also serves as the chairperson of the Belgian Association of Japanese Language Instructors.

Background to the Establishment of the Courses and Educational Goals

In a conversation on the subject, Head Professor Vande Walle, whom I mentioned previously, explained that his motivation for establishing a Japanese Studies major was to foster young specialists in Japanese Studies. At the time he began, Japanese language and Japanese studies were broadly categorized within the field of Asian Studies. Students were able to get a general knowledge of Asia, but it wasn’t until he set up the Japan Studies major that “Japanese language” education received the emphasis it deserves and he was able to utilize Japanese language educators to the fullest.

According to the professor, when he began his research, in the 1970s, this research area was not considered to fall within the range of mainstream academia, and so it attracted very few academics. However, in the 1980s, with the rise of Japan’s “economic power,” Japan was able to hold her head high and there was a burst of worldwide interest in the country. As a result, Japan-related research earned a position the limelight, and it wasn’t very difficult to establish a Japanese major at the Catholic University of Leuven.
Textbooks Used

*Gendai Nihongo Ko-su* (Course in Modern Japanese, published by Nagoya University Press)

First and second year university students: Volumes 1 & 2 of *Gendai Nihongo* (beginning)

Third year university students: Volumes 3 & 4 of *Gendai Nihongo* (intermediate)

While *Gendai Nihongo* is the main textbook for the 1st and 2nd year courses, each instructor uses other materials in a supplementary manner. Beginning in their third year, students continue to study the Japanese language, but they also determine what they would like to study in Japanese, and material is added to their studies from that vantage point. Materials from Japanese media (newspapers, radio, and television) are also utilized in the course of Newspaper Japanese, in order to teach not only Japanese language but also literacy in terms of media. In grammar classes, issues of modality are studied and a more analytical approach is taken.

E-Learning

Beginning in 1997, with Mr. Hans Coppens’ leadership, the International Communications Technology (ICT) Project was launched.

University Exchange Agreements

The university has official exchange programs with: Shinshu University, Kansai University, Kyushu University, Waseda University, Rikkyo University, Seijo University, Kobe University, Osaka University, Fukuoka Women’s University, The Historiographical Institute University of Tokyo, and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

Issues

First of all, with the number of students increasing every year, the program suffers from an insufficient number of faculty members to meet student needs. At least one more professor and two to three additional lecturers and research fellows are needed. (The above information is based on discussions with Professor Vande Walle.)

Secondly, there are issues with the exchange programs. Students who go on exchanges to other European universities can earn university credits through the Erasmus Mundus program. Currently, there is no university credit reciprocity with most Japanese universities, so this creates a major problem for students. Also, there are financial issues, in that many students have to solve financial problems unless they can find scholarships. (The above information is based on discussions with Ms. Sakurai.)
Contact Information
Dr. Willy Vande Walle
Catholic University of Leuven
Department of Oriental and Slavonic Studies
Section of Japanese Studies
(Faculteit Letteren)
Blijde-Inkomststraat 21 - bus 03318, B-3000 Leuven
Phone: +32-16-324948
e-mail: willy.vandewalle@arts.kuleuven.be

Naoko Sakurai, Head Japanese Instructor
(same address as Dr. Vande Walle)
Phone: +32-16-324732
e-mail: Naoko.sakurai@arts.kuleuven.ac.be

Ghent University
As mentioned in the introduction, Ghent University was the birthplace of Japanese Studies in Belgium. These days, the Japanese programs are found in the Bachelor of Oriental Languages and Cultures Department. In addition to Japanese Studies, the department holds classes in Chinese Studies, Indian Studies (Sanskrit and Hindi), and studies in other topics. At this time, Leuven has a larger faculty and more students than Ghent, but the numbers at Ghent have been steadily increasing over the last several years. The 2009 academic year welcomed 70 new students to the program. In the Bachelor of Oriental Languages and Cultures Department, the Chinese program is larger in scale, both in terms of the student body and the faculty, than the Japanese program. Conversely, however, the Chinese program has been shrinking over the past few years, while enrollment in Japanese courses has enjoyed a growth spurt. Head Professor Niehaus, who is described in detail below, says that the falloff in the numbers of students wishing to study Chinese is likely linked to the negative image of China in the media. There was a Korean program a few years ago, but it was eliminated based on budget cuts.

Degrees Conferred
B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

Courses Offered
Modern Japanese: Grammar, Conversation, Writing, Newspaper Subscription (Graduate level)
Business Writing (Graduate level), Literature Translation (Graduate level; Example: Yoshimoto
Banana)
Classical Chinese (1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} year students)
Classical Japanese (3\textsuperscript{rd} year students)
Society and Topical Matters, Japan (2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year students; graduate level): history, geography, economics, sociology, education, corporate culture, gender and minorities, popular culture, etc.
Oriental Literature: East Asia
East-Asian Ideologies: Confucianism, ancient Japanese literature and culture, Shintoism, modern religions
Research Methodology, Japan: Invaluable information for researchers on Japan (how names are given, how to determine different historical periods, how to find materials, how to write reports and essays, etc.)
Research Internship
Buddhism

Full-Time Faculty
Head Professor: Andreas Niehaus (Japan Studies, Martial Arts Education), German National Professor: Christian Uhl (Japanese Literature, Intellectual History)
Instructors: Ako Kanie (Japanese Language Education)
Three teaching Assistants: Klaus Pinte, Leslie de Vries, Michale Hauspië
Two volunteer Japanese language teachers

Background to the Establishment of the Courses and Educational Goals

Japan Studies at Ghent University originally had a strong focus in Religious Studies and Philology. Previously, there had been a professor who specialized in Buddhism and Mantras. At that time, the school was strong in Buddhist Studies and there were classes on Buddhism. Since that professor passed away, the school is no longer strong in this area. These days, the focus is on more modern subjects and business-related courses have increased. One factor influencing the inception of the course in Japanese Economics was a bit of subtle pressure from the Belgian government. The core goals of the department are to “nurture human resources” and create graduates that “contribute to society.” The professor tells us that this policy isn’t just what you see at Ghent University, but what you will probably notice this all around Europe. Despite these practical goals, however, our classes in the Japanese department at Ghent University tend to be intellectual. (Based on discussions with Professor Niehaus)
Textbooks Used

*Genki (Japan Times)*

According to the aforementioned Professor Niehaus, this textbook meets the students’ needs and is easy to use. As supplementary material works such as *A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar* (Japan Times) are used for more detailed explanations. Also “Super Kit 1,” which is furnished by the Japan Foundation, is being used. This work introduces Japanese customs, coins (copies), vocabulary picture sheets, and the like. A variety of practical items and small objects come in a box set. Another item available from the Japan Foundation, which is also used in programs at this university, is a video called “The Way of Life in Japan.”

**Society and Topical Matters, Japan**

Additionally, in the Modern Japanese Society course, the book *An Introduction to Japanese Society* by Yoshio Sugimoto is used and in the Japanese Literature course, they study with *A History of Japanese Literature* by Shuichi Kato.

**E-Learning**

At Ghent University, interactive computer learning is at an advanced level. There are only six hours a week of contact time for Japanese language instruction, so it is necessary to supplement training with e-learning. Additional *kanji* that can’t be covered in class or the DVD corresponding to the textbook *Genki* can be viewed on the Web.
Classes via Satellite Relay
Currently, there are experimental classes being conducted by satellite in conjunction with the International Studies Department of Hosei University. Lectures that have been held thus far include topics such as, “Japan in the History of the World” and “The Japan Olympic Movement and National Identity,” to name a few. These lectures are given in English.

University Exchange Agreements
Ritsumeikan University (under which third-year students go to Japan for six months) Kanazawa University, Kobe University, Kyoto Study Program, World Perspective Course, NGO World Campus Japan (Students visit actual communities and organizations in Japan)

Other Research Plans
Internships (Graduate program students spend two months conducting research at a Japanese company, a company with ties to Japan, or a cultural organization. The Japan-Belgium Society and the EU Japan Center actively promote and assist with these positions.)

Issues
The most significant problem is that students have few opportunities to travel to Japan. There is the six-month study abroad program, but few students apply for it. This is mostly because of financial issues that these students have, so it is certain that not all third year students are able to take advantage of this chance to study overseas. Another issue is reciprocal credit, so it is of the essence that Ghent University find a university in Japan with a compatible system in order to establish a more viable exchange program.

“Tomo no Kai” Activities
Proposed by students in the Japanese program in 2008, the university now has a Japanese friendship society, “Tomo no Kai.” The original purpose that the students had in mind was to raise funds that would allow them to travel to Japan. They put on a number of events involving sushi, ikebana, karaoke, dramas, animation (anime) and karate. The program was a success and from the money they earned sponsoring these events, Professor Niehaus was actually able to take the students on their inaugural journey, a two-week trip to Japan, for the first time in 2009.

According to organizers and current group members, Arne Deprez and Dominique Miguel Borm, they have not only devised a method for earning money for trips to Japan, but they’ve also are planning student field trips to tour Japan-related companies.

Besides introducing people to food and pop culture, the group has study sessions on such diverse
topics as “Marxists in Japan” and “Western Principles in Japan.”

Thanks to this group, students in the Japanese program are able to help one another and, furthermore, overall cooperation among students and the faculty has deepened. The two representatives of the group spoke with great enthusiasm, saying they are eager to plan a variety of future events.

Arne Deprez and Dominique Borm, organizers of “Tomo no Kai.”

“Tomo no Kai.” Website:
http://www.southandeastasia.ugent.be/Japanologie#tomo%20no%20kai

Contact Information
Professor Andreas Niehaus
Language and Cultures of South and East Asia
University of Ghent
Blandijinberg 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
+32-9-264-4157
andreas.niehaus@Ugent.be

University of Liège
At the University of Liège (situated in the French-speaking region), Japanese language and Japanese studies are treated as elective subjects that are classified as undergraduate programs in modern and classical languages and literature within the Department of Philosophy and Letters. In 1993, as part of this setup, Japanese and related courses began to be offered with instructors from Japan in place. In 1991, with financial support from The Japan Foundation and at the initiative of an honorary professor active at the time, a Center for Japanese Studies was launched, but it was discontinued in 2002 due to budget shortfalls and other constraints. Thanks, however, to the efforts of Professor Andreas Thele, a new Center for Japanese Studies is scheduled to be opened in March, 2010. The Center will initially be equipped with some 2,000 books on Japan and publications in the field of Japanese studies, as well as Japanese language audio-visual aids to be used by researchers
and students.

**Courses Offered**
Japanese Language: Introduction to the Japanese Language
Individuals and Community in Japan
Japanese Philosophy (as part of the course on East Asian Beliefs and Philosophy): Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc.

Apart from the course offerings by the Department, Japanese-language classes (called Japanese I and Japanese II), offered by Ms. Kanako Goto, are also available. In the 2009 academic year, about sixty students attended the department-offered courses, and students attending Ms. Goto’s classes numbered twenty-two.

**Textbooks Used**
An original textbook compiled by Professor Thele, introduced below in more detail, entitled *Introduction à la langue et à l’écriture japonaises* (University of Liège Press), is used. His textbook consists of excerpts from Japanese textbooks used by the University of Tsukuba, where the professor was once a visiting researcher, newspaper articles personally selected by him, frequently used travel-related expressions extracted from Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) brochures, and other printed materials from additional sources. The textbook also contains exercises to prepare the student for the Japanese Government-administered Japanese Language Proficiency Test. He says that, given the diversity of students’ interests, he drew on a wide variety of sources. Explanatory comments are given in English and French throughout the book.

Conversational-style-based textbooks of the Japanese for Busy People variety are commonly used by other Japanese-teaching institutions and elsewhere, but Professor Thele believes that it is just as important to properly teach reading and writing, which is why he compiled this original textbook.

**Full-Time Teaching Staff**
Professor Andreas Thele (East Asian Beliefs and Philosophy); a German national.
E-Learning

The University of Liège is offering more and more courses in the e-learning format, but Professor Thele’s classes are not available in this modality, nor is e-learning recommended at this time because his courses are organized on the assumption that it is more important to study through face-to-face discussions in the classroom.

University Exchange Agreements

There are currently no educational institutions with which the University of Liège maintains a student/personnel exchange agreement.

Issues

One major issue concerns the dire paucity of allotted course time, with only two contact hours a week. What is most needed is to increase the hours of class time and bring in more teaching staff, especially native Japanese-speaking instructors, whose participation is indispensable. When the Center for Japanese Studies was in existence, one had access to an abundance of Japan-related books on the premises, but they have now been stashed away, and the students have lost access to them. Courses with better resources are available at campuses in the Dutch-speaking regions of the country, but French-speaking students face a language barrier there. The only alternative open to them today is to attend one of the universities in Paris.

Currently, at the University of Liège, Japanese language and Japanese studies courses are not integrated under a unified degree-awarding Japanese Studies program, and the students who come together to attend available Japanese courses are of diverse backgrounds and interests. It is also problematic that students from different academic years are seen, here and there, attending the same classes.

The Dutch-speaking region, which maintains more vibrant contact with Japan, appears to receive some government backup, while the French-speaking region – possibly because of its active interest in Third World affairs – does not provide much support for the causes of Japanese language and Japanese Studies. The Japan Foundation, for its part, seems to dole out more highly prioritized
assistance to universities in the Dutch-speaking region (the Catholic University of Leuven, Ghent University, etc.). (Based on discussions with Professor Thele)

Contact Information
Professor Andreas Thele
Department of language and modern literature
rue de Pitteurs 20 (Bat. L3), 4020 Liege, Belgium
+32-4-366-5583
andreas.thele@ulg.ac.be

Japan Research Center
Chair: Professor Andreas Thele
Japanese language teacher: Miss Kanako Goto
Administrator: Mrs Edith Culot

The Belgian Association of Japanese Language Teachers
The Belgian Association of Japanese Language Teachers was started at the above-mentioned Catholic University of Leuven, and is currently led by Ms. Naoko Sakurai, instructor of Japanese at that university. It came into being in 1997, and its members have since been holding bimonthly study meetings, occasional Japanese educator workshops, and other forms of get-togethers.

According to the Association’s President Naoko Sakurai, the purpose of establishing the association lay in building a networking connection between instructors of Japanese in Belgium and those across Europe and in Japan and as a means of creating and/or reinforcing relationships with Japanese-language education organizations. At present, news related to Japanese language education and information mainly emanate from Japan, and, given this situation, the one big challenges for those on the forefront of Japanese education overseas is the difficulty of obtaining the latest teaching materials and related information. However, the establishment of the Association of Japanese Language Teachers has consolidated a pan-European network of Japanese language teachers and has ties with Japan, making it possible for those concerned to share their knowledge and understanding for mutual edification.
Belgian Association of Japanese Language Teachers’ Website:
http://www.bnk-nihongo.be/

Issues Concerning Textbooks Currently Used
There are no Japanese language textbooks with explanations in Dutch or French that have been independently prepared and published by Belgian sources. Hence, textbooks published by Japanese
universities that have English-speaking students in mind, vis-à-vis footnotes and explanations, are being used. In the fact-finding interviews conducted on this survey tour, one of the questions posed was whether would be a handicap for Belgian students, for whom English is not their first language, to use textbooks explaining grammatical points, etc. in English.

Professor Vande Walle (Department Chair, Catholic University of Leuven) is aware that it will be an extremely difficult task to publish a Japanese language textbook written in Dutch because there are few Dutch-speaking students of Japanese. In short, the market needs for such text are insufficient. Moreover, if a Dutch publication is to be produced that is comparable in quality to the first-rate English language textbooks widely available on the market today, a considerable amount of labor will have to be dedicated to the project. Securing the human resources for such purposes would prove next to impossible. At the same time, the professor is keenly aware of the need for a Dutch-based Japanese education program. That is because there prevails throughout the Dutch-speaking student population of Belgium a sense of inflated self-confidence that they are competent enough in English to understand it well, although—and they are not aware of the fact—it is not possible for this to be case. He feels that as long as Belgians study Japanese through a language that is not that is not their first language, they will fail to acquire a deep understanding of Japanese and will not learn the delicate nuances of idiomatic expressions in Japanese.

President Naoko Sakurai of the Belgian Association of Japanese Language Teachers thinks there is a possibility that Japanese language textbook written in Dutch could emerge as a uniquely Belgian project in the future. She cites as grounds for this forward-looking perspective the existence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) stipulated by the Council of Europe in 1996. This framework provides a set of competence evaluation criteria related to concerns in the compilation of foreign language education curricula, anxieties about textbooks and examinations, and concerns about progress made by foreign language learners. This framework was elaborated on in the larger context of the awareness that Europeans face a need to develop an ability to communicate with one another better, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. While Japanese is not one of the languages commonly used for communication in everyday life in Europe, based on legislation for adult education that passed in 1999, guidelines for adult language education based on the above-mentioned CEFR have been established. Therefore, within the institutions for language education in the Dutch-speaking community, the curriculum based on the guideline as well as now language textbooks are being re-established. The current situation appears to point to the possibility that a Japanese-teaching textbook of Belgium’s own will see the light of day at some point.

On the other hand, there are those, like Professor Andreas Niehaus of Ghent University, who are supportive of the use of English as a means of teaching Japanese. The textbook Genki (Japan Times), mentioned elsewhere in this report, which he uses in his classes, is presented in English, but he
thinks that his students have a sufficiently high-level of English to follow the explanations and that the matter is a non-issue. In another course he teaches, “Modern and Contemporary Japanese Society,” he uses an English translation of a work written by a Japanese author, as will be touched upon again a little later. Professor Niehaus thinks that the unavailability of Japanese teaching materials in Dutch is actually proving beneficial for students because a strong knowledge of English is of greater use today. He believes that it is important to be able to read, write and communicate in English.

Professor Thele of the University of Liège, too, is of the opinion, likewise, that his students’ knowledge of English is strong enough to justify non-use of French-language teaching materials. Today the language of choice for communication in cyberspace is English, and we are all expected to be conversant in English.

**What Motivates the Students**

Unlike the students who once found a motivation for going into Japanese and Japan Studies against the backdrop of Japan’s vigorous economic growth, those drawn to Japan today despite Japan’s decline in economic prosperity seem in many instances to find themselves lured to Japan through the channel of pop culture (*anime*, comics, and movies). More established, traditional genres such as judo and karate continue to hold their own as winsome magnets. But, in not a few cases, conversations with students show that there are aspects of Japan other than that represented by comics and anime that they find interesting. A few more examples are given below of the gleanings from our fieldwork with regard to what it is that motivates the students to study Japanese (interviewees are identified by their initials):

**On the Catholic University of Leuven campus:**

SB: From early on, I have been attracted to Japan’s ancient past, such as the case of the Heian culture, the samurai culture, and so forth. I have also been interested in how the *kimono* is made as well as the use of colors for them. I came into contact with *anime*, comics, and other faces of the new culture of Japan at the Japan Week event held in Belgium. There and then, I decided to study Japanese at the university. I like the manga “Nodame Cantabile” very much.

JJ: I am interested in Japanese politics. I chose Japanese because I thought I needed to study Japanese politics in Japanese. I am particularly interested in the Japanese politics of the 1960s and subsequent decades, and things are getting even more interesting now with the Japan Democratic Party in power.

JF: I met a Japanese student when I was in high school, and that encounter caused me to develop an interest in Japan. Now, I am interested in studying Japanese politics and history, and the Okinawa dialect, too.
On the Ghent University campus:

DL: I love the anime works of Hayao Miyazaki. And I found the Japanese words themselves pretty cool. Samurai movies are nice, too. China has a bundle of issues such as human rights violations, Communism, and what not, and I don’t like that. In high school I could not learn anything about Japan, and I thought I would like to study subjects related to Japan when I was in university.

NT: I found how Japanese people apologize fascinating. They bow down repeatedly to apologize and, in that point, differ greatly from the Belgian people.

On the University of Liège campus:

SG: A friend once showed me a manga, and I immediately became interested in Japanese society. I am especially interested in Japan’s religious life and philosophical background. In some respects, our everyday life and cultural aspects of our existence are integrated in a Christian social setup, but the circumstance of the Japanese people interest me because, although they are not devoted to any particular religion, they live by their own, unique way of thinking.

JD: In high school, I studied English, German and Spanish, and so I wanted to study Asian languages when I got to be a university student. Japanese manga provided a good window on Japan for students who want to gain familiarity with Japanese culture and society. We can learn Japanese expressions through manga. After I graduate, I want to become a language teacher. Maybe I can teach Japanese in Australia.
Career Choices Following Graduation

Not much can be said in general terms on this subject given the university-level Japanese-language proficiency gap between Belgium and Japan. At the University of Liège, for example, Japanese is an elective subject, making it difficult to assume that a graduating student who has done work in Japanese there will be realistically up to the challenge of the real-life demands of using his or her Japanese-speaking workplace. It stands to reason, then, that few such students opt to join Japanese companies (according to Professor Thele). On the other hand, even among the graduates of the Catholic University of Leuven and other institutions that offer degree programs in Japanese, few find employment with Japanese companies. In recent years, especially, Japanese companies are increasingly localizing their employment practices for cost curtailment, thus creating the need for Japanese-speaking Belgians (as observed by Ms. Sakurai).

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