

## Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning and Regional Revitalization: A Taiwan–Japan Case Study

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### Abstract

This study examines how short-term, cross-cultural experiential programs support sustainability learning in higher education. The focus is on a case analysis of two Taiwan–Japan regional revitalization workshops held in 2024 and 2025. This research uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. Methods used include interviews, participant observation, instructor reflections, course artifacts, and post-program surveys. This research investigates how Taiwanese and Japanese students interpret local issues, negotiate intercultural collaboration, and develop practical, feasibility-oriented thinking during field immersion. Findings show that students deepened their understanding of sustainability by comparing revitalization contexts in both countries. The study recognizes how demographic trends, cultural identity, and institutional histories shape community development. Both groups improved their intercultural communication skills. Students learned to adjust language use, manage differing teamwork norms, and navigate trilingual communication. Field engagement strengthened the students’ sense of place and improved their ability to assess community needs and the proposal’s feasibility. Instructor reflections revealed the challenges of cross-cultural facilitation, such as language imbalance and varied student preparedness. The reflections also underscore the value of long-term institutional partnerships for meaningful engagement. This study contributes to sustainability education research by illustrating how comparative, community-based immersion can cultivate action competence, ethical awareness, and cross-cultural understanding within international higher education.

## Keywords

cross-cultural experiential learning; intercultural communication; regional revitalization; sustainability education; university social responsibility

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, universities across Asia have been advancing their contribution to regional sustainability agendas through community engagement, knowledge co-production, and collaborative problem-solving. Taiwan and Japan, facing similar demographic and structural challenges—such as population aging, rural decline, and uneven regional development—have each promoted higher-education policies that encourage universities to participate in regional revitalization. In Taiwan, national initiatives such as the Ministry of Education's University Social Responsibility (USR) program and the National Science and Technology Council's Humanities Innovation and Social Practice program emphasize the importance of active engagement with local communities. Japan has also prioritized regional revitalization (*chiiki sōsei*) as a national priority, urging universities to collaborate with local governments and community organizations. Within this context, cross-border partnerships have emerged as a vital mechanism for strengthening universities' capacities to address sustainability challenges while developing students' global and civic competencies.

The Taiwan–Japan Alliance (TJA) for Regional Revitalization and Social Practice, established in 2021, represents one such institutionalized platform for long-term collaboration. Initiated through the joint efforts of Taiwan's USR Center and the Humanities Innovation and Social Practice Office, the alliance formalized partnerships among universities in both countries to promote cross-campus teaching, faculty student mobility, and community-engaged action (Humanity Innovation and Social Practice, 2021; TJA for Regional Revitalization and Social Practice, n.d.). Through regular forums, co-teaching initiatives, field-based courses, and shared communication channels, the TJA aims to strengthen knowledge exchange and support regional sustainability through higher education.

Short-term, intensive field-based programs—such as cross-cultural workshops on regional revitalization—have become a core pedagogical strategy within this alliance. These workshops situate students in real community settings, require them to work in mixed-nationality teams, and encourage them to co-design responses to local needs. For Taiwanese students, the experience provides exposure to Japan's long-term, community-driven revitalization practices; for Japanese students, it offers firsthand engagement with Taiwan's SDG-focused coastal communities. Despite their benefits, these programs also present challenges related to language use, cultural norms, compressed timelines, and differing institutional expectations across the two countries.

Although cross-cultural service learning and regional revitalization programs have expanded in East Asia, empirical research on how students learn, negotiate meaning, and design action in cross-national, community-engaged sustainability courses remains limited. Few studies have examined how students from different cultural backgrounds jointly interpret local issues, navigate cross-cultural teamwork, or reflect on feasibility and community expectations in short-term international programs. Further research is needed to understand how such programs shape the students' sustainability attitudes, sense of place, and intentions for future community engagement.

To address this gap, this study examines two Taiwan–Japan cross-cultural regional revitalization workshops conducted in 2024 (Japan) and 2025 (Taiwan), respectively. Using a mixed-methods case study design—including qualitative interviews, participant observation, faculty reflections, and post-program surveys—this research investigates how students understand local contexts, collaborate across cultures, and transform their perspectives through experiential learning. By situating the analysis within the broader institutional efforts of the TJA, this study provides empirical insights into how universities can cultivate sustainability competencies through international community-engaged programs.

Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How do students make sense of local sustainability issues through experiential and community-engaged learning in an international context?
2. What similarities and differences emerge between Taiwanese and Japanese students in their approaches to collaboration, problem analysis, and action design?
3. How do short-term international field programs influence students' sense of place, sustainability attitudes, and intentions for future community engagement?
4. What understandings of regional development and feasibility are reflected in students' proposed action plans?
5. What challenges do faculty encounter when jointly designing and facilitating cross-cultural sustainability learning programs?

By answering these questions, this study contributes to the literature on sustainability education, international experiential learning, and USR. It offers insights into how universities can enhance cross-national sustainability curricula, how community-engaged programs can foster students' action competence, and how institutional partnerships can support long-term regional revitalization efforts across Taiwan and Japan.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Taiwan–Japan University Collaboration and the Development of Regional Revitalization Education*

Taiwan and Japan have faced similar demographic and structural challenges in recent years, including population aging, regional imbalance, and shifting roles for higher education. These factors have encouraged universities in both countries to take on more active roles in supporting regional development and addressing community needs, a trend also noted in broader discussions of sustainability-oriented higher education and civic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Wiek et al., 2011). In this context, cross-national partnerships have become a crucial strategy for sustaining local engagement and expanding educational innovation.

The TJA for Regional Revitalization and Social Practice was formally launched in 2021 by Taiwan's USR Center and the Humanities Innovation and Social Practice Office. Official reports show that the alliance aims to establish long-term, structured cooperation through joint teaching, faculty and student exchanges, collaborative research, and community-engaged field programs (Humanity Innovation and Social Practice, 2021; TJA, n.d).

Scholars have noted several characteristics of this growing collaboration: increasingly institutionalized mechanisms, diverse curricular models, interdisciplinary integration, and reciprocal policy influence (Wang, 2020). These developments align with Japan's Center of Community Plus initiative, which promotes university–local government collaboration to address the decline of regional communities (Tsai, 2023). Taiwan's USR framework similarly emphasizes social practice, needs-based engagement, and long-term partnership building, while encouraging universities to widen their global linkages as part of community revitalization efforts (Kuo, n.d.).

Overall, Taiwan–Japan collaboration has evolved from informal exchanges toward structured, sustained cooperation linked to regional revitalization. Research suggests that such partnerships not only strengthen local problem-solving capacity but also cultivate cross-cultural competencies essential for future talent development (Wang, 2020).

## ***2.2. The Role and Functions of International Linkages in Regional Revitalization Education***

International linkages within regional revitalization initiatives usually take the form of academic partnerships, field-based experiential learning, and digital or interdisciplinary innovations (Chen et al., 2025). Such experiential approaches have been widely recognized as effective in supporting applied learning and reflection in real-world contexts (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kolb, 1984). These forms of cooperation broaden learning resources, enhance students' global awareness, and create opportunities for universities to address sustainability challenges jointly.

In Taiwan, recent examples include cross-border revitalization workshops hosted by the National Taiwan Ocean University (2025) and the collaboration between National Pingtung University and Hirosaki University, which introduced Japanese regional revitalization texts to Taiwan for the first time (National Pingtung University, n.d.). These initiatives demonstrate how international collaboration can expand the scope of local revitalization education by introducing diverse development models, community engagement approaches, and cross-cultural communication practices.

Scholars have also shown that student participation in international cultural or community-based events can deepen their understanding of intangible heritage, cultural identity, and place-based social issues (K.-W. Lin, 2022). At the same time, digital tools—including location-based media used in remote communities—have been shown to strengthen students' engagement and enhance the sustainability of community–university partnerships (Her, 2022).

Taken together, these studies indicate that international linkages support regional revitalization by providing new resources, broadening students' perspectives, and fostering innovative approaches to community engagement.

## ***2.3. Educational Aims and Learning Outcomes in Regional Revitalization Practice***

Regional revitalization education emphasizes cultivating students' ability to understand local issues, collaborate with community actors, and engage in problem-solving rooted in real-world contexts. These aims align with broader sustainability education frameworks, which emphasize key competencies such as systems

thinking, collaboration, and action-oriented learning (Wiek et al., 2011). In the Taiwanese context, such educational directions are also reflected in policy discussions on regional revitalization and talent cultivation (Shang, 2022).

However, scholars have also noted that universities must carefully manage their role when entering local communities. As C. Y. Lin (2021) argues, while university participation can support community development, it may also unintentionally cause disruption if institutional needs overshadow local priorities. This underscores the need for respectful, long-term collaboration that prioritizes community perspectives and ensures mutual benefit.

Empirical studies of classroom-based and field-based USR programs demonstrate that students often gain a deeper understanding of social issues, empathy, and problem-solving abilities through direct engagement (Hung, 2022). Cross-campus and cross-national initiatives—such as the Excellent Neighbor Fishermen program reported by National Kaohsiung University of Science and technology (Lee et al., 2024)—also illustrate how collaborative community engagement can enhance students' motivation, awareness of local industries, and ability to design actionable proposals for regional development.

In summary, the literature suggests that regional revitalization education aims to cultivate socially responsible, community-engaged learners. Through sustained partnerships and experiential learning, universities can help students develop both the competencies and the ethical awareness required to contribute meaningfully to local sustainability issues, particularly through direct engagement with real-world contexts and community interaction (Kolb, 1984; Wiek et al., 2011).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Context

This study was conducted within the framework of the TJA for Regional Revitalization and Social Practice, which supports long-term cross-border collaboration in community-engaged education. Two intensive field-based programs served as the primary research settings: the 2024 summer workshop in Japan and the 2025 spring workshop in Taiwan.

The 2024 workshop, held in Kuroshio Town and Yasuda Town in the Kochi Prefecture, introduced Taiwanese students to Japan's long-standing models of community-centered revitalization. Students visited community-run facilities, interacted with local government officers, observed heritage preservation and coastal development initiatives, and worked in mixed groups to examine issues such as depopulation, aging, and youth outmigration.

The 2025 workshop, implemented in Kaohsiung and Pingtung's coastal communities, engaged Japanese students in Taiwan's fisheries culture, cultural diversity, and SDG-oriented community practices. Students visited local associations, elementary schools, and cultural practitioners, and developed bilingual proposals focusing on marine education, cultural identity, sustainable tourism, and community development.

Together, these two workshops provided a comparative, cross-cultural environment for examining how students from different backgrounds interpret local issues, collaborate across languages and cultures, and develop understandings of regional revitalization.

To support student engagement and intercultural readiness, both workshops were structured with pre-departure preparation, field-based activities, and post-field reflection. Before departure, students participated in orientation sessions introducing basic cultural norms, local etiquette, and contextual information about the host communities. Faculty members from Taiwan and Japan also conducted joint online briefings to explain learning objectives, field tasks, and expectations. In some cases, preparation extended to practical arrangements; for example, Taiwanese students traveling to Japan prepared basic food ingredients and seasonings in response to local living conditions and planned group cooking activities.

During the workshops, learning extended beyond field visits to include stakeholder interviews, group discussions, and collaborative analysis. Students worked in mixed-nationality teams to identify local issues, interpret community needs, and co-develop context-sensitive proposals. At the conclusion of each workshop, teams presented their proposals in a formal setting, outlining problem identification, analysis of local conditions, and suggested action plans. These presentations were shared with instructors and, in some cases, community stakeholders, allowing students to receive feedback and reflect on the feasibility of their ideas.

The workshops were open elective courses offered at the university level, with students recruited through an application and selection process. Priority was given to students who had previously taken courses related to regional revitalization or community-based learning. Applicants were further evaluated through interviews, including assessments of their language abilities and learning motivations to ensure their readiness for cross-cultural participation.

Participants came from diverse academic disciplines and year levels. A total of nine Taiwanese and nine Japanese students participated in the Japan workshop (2024), which was held over nine days. The Taiwan workshop (2025) involved eleven Taiwanese and nine Japanese students and lasted for seven days. Among the participants, five students (three Taiwanese and two Japanese) were selected as focal interview participants in this study. All five had participated in both the Japan and Taiwan workshops, allowing for comparative reflection across the two contexts.

### **3.2. Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' learning processes within short-term, cross-cultural experiential programs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data sources included interviews, participant observation, instructor reflections, course artifacts, and post-program surveys. Both workshops required students to participate in field visits, conduct stakeholder interviews, collaborate in mixed-nationality teams, and present community-based action plans, providing multiple points of observation for the research.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure depth and credibility. Semi-structured interviews with five students (three Taiwanese and two Japanese) explored their motivations, intercultural experiences, perspectives on revitalization, and reflections on collaboration. Faculty members who co-designed and facilitated the workshops provided written reflections and teaching journals documenting pedagogical decisions, instructional challenges, and observations of student engagement. Field notes were compiled during community visits, team discussions, and proposal development, capturing real-time interactions and cultural negotiation. Post-program surveys yielded 21 valid responses from the Taiwanese participants in the 2025 workshop, assessing environmental action intention, community responsibility, and intercultural attitudes. Course artifacts—including worksheets, proposal drafts, and presentation slides—were analyzed to understand students' conceptualization of local issues and feasibility.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed. A thematic analysis approach was used to code the qualitative data. Codes were developed inductively and refined through constant comparison across Taiwanese and Japanese participants to identify similarities and differences in learning processes, communication strategies, and interpretations of local development. Survey findings were summarized descriptively to complement the qualitative analysis. The triangulation of interviews, field observations, instructor reflections, and course products enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

To further clarify the mixed-methods approach, additional details on data collection and analysis are provided. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the study's research questions and relevant literature on sustainability learning and intercultural collaboration. Interview guides included open-ended questions exploring students' motivations, perceptions of local issues, intercultural experiences, and reflections on collaboration. While a flexible format was maintained to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences, all interviews followed a common thematic structure to ensure comparability across cases.

Qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. The research team manually coded the transcripts without the use of specialized qualitative analysis software. Codes were developed through careful reading and comparison of interview data to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants.

The survey instrument was designed to assess students' environmental attitudes, community responsibility, and intercultural learning outcomes, drawing on established constructs in sustainability education and experiential learning research. The research team reviewed the survey items to ensure clarity and relevance. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify general trends in students' learning outcomes.

Due to ethical considerations and the qualitative nature of the study, full interview transcripts and raw survey data are not publicly available. Findings are presented in an anonymized and synthesized manner, and the authors may provide additional information upon reasonable request.

### **3.4. Research Limitations**

Several contextual factors influenced the research process. The short duration of the workshops constrained the depth of students' community immersion, and the small number of interview participants reflected the exploratory nature of the study. Trilingual communication (Mandarin–Japanese–English) shaped how students articulated their experiences. The dual roles of instructors as both facilitators and researchers may have influenced data interpretation; this issue is further addressed in the positionality statement Section 3.5. To mitigate these constraints, the analysis incorporated multiple data sources, reflective documentation, and methodological triangulation. Despite these limitations, the rich qualitative data and comparative cross-national context provide meaningful insights into students' learning within international regional revitalization programs.

### **3.5. Positionality of the Researchers**

The researchers in this study were directly involved in the design and implementation of the workshops, serving as course instructors and facilitators who guided students during field activities and interacted with community partners. In addition, the cross-institutional research team had several years of prior collaboration, including co-teaching and joint course delivery across Taiwan and Japan.

This insider position enabled the researchers to gain in-depth, process-oriented insights into students' learning experiences, but also required careful reflexivity in data interpretation. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by integrating multiple data sources, including interviews, participant observation, instructor reflections, and course artifacts.

## **4. Findings**

The findings of this study draw from interviews, field observations, instructor reflections, and students' written work generated during the 2024 Japan and 2025 Taiwan regional revitalization workshops. Analysis revealed several interconnected themes concerning (a) Taiwanese students' learning experiences, (b) Japanese students' interpretations and cross-cultural engagement, (c) shared learning patterns across both groups, and (d) instructors' observations regarding team dynamics and pedagogical implications. Together, these themes illustrate how short-term, cross-cultural experiential programs shape students' understanding of regional revitalization, sustainability, intercultural communication, and community engagement.

### **4.1. Taiwanese Students' Learning Experiences**

#### **4.1.1. Motivations and Expectations**

Taiwanese students expressed diverse motivations for joining the workshop. Many reported an interest in understanding Japan's revitalization practices, particularly the long-term community–government collaborations characteristic of Japanese regional planning. Others viewed the workshop as an opportunity for cultural exchange, personal growth, or exploration of potential future study paths. For several participants, the workshop represented their first experience participating in an intensive international field program.

Despite these varied motivations, students shared a common expectation: to compare the revitalization practices of Taiwan and Japan, and to gain insights applicable to Taiwan's own community development challenges. They hoped to observe concrete strategies implemented in Japan—such as heritage preservation, local industry branding, and population retention—and evaluate whether similar approaches could be adapted to Taiwanese contexts.

#### 4.1.2. Awareness of Sustainability and Local Issues

Field immersion in Kuroshio and Yasuda towns prompted Taiwanese students to reflect on the differences between Taiwanese and Japanese approaches to regional development. Students noted Japan's strong emphasis on long-term planning, institutional stability, and the preservation of local culture. They observed that many revitalization projects in Japan were designed to operate over decades rather than short funding cycles, contributing to a sense of continuity and community trust.

Through interactions with local officials and community practitioners, Taiwanese students also became aware of the complexity of sustainability issues. While they initially assumed that revitalization could be understood primarily through economic or tourism-focused strategies, they came to recognize the importance of cultural identity, community participation, and intergenerational collaboration. Several students commented in interviews that “revitalization goes beyond increasing tourist numbers” and instead requires “building long-term relationships and strengthening local pride.”

In comparing the two contexts, several students felt that the revitalization challenges they encountered in Taiwanese coastal communities—such as cultural preservation or local participation—seemed less structurally complex than the issues observed in Japan, where population aging, labor shortages, and multi-stakeholder coordination required long-term planning. This contrast helped students more clearly distinguish between short-term community projects and the long-term institutional systems necessary for sustaining revitalization efforts.

#### 4.1.3. Intercultural Challenges and Communication Growth

Working in mixed-nationality teams presented both challenges and growth opportunities for Taiwanese students. Some reported communication difficulties in interviews, either due to language barriers or differences in discussion styles. Taiwanese students described their Japanese peers as more reserved in group settings, which initially made collaboration on idea generation difficult. However, as the workshop progressed, they learned to adapt their communication strategies, slow down discussions, and use non-verbal cues or simple English to bridge gaps.

Several Taiwanese students also found themselves taking on informal translation or cultural mediation roles during field visits and team discussions. They noted that this responsibility required them not only to translate words, but also to interpret cultural cues and contextual meanings for their Japanese peers. While demanding, this role strengthened their leadership and attentiveness, and deepened their understanding of both community narratives and team dynamics.

Several students also noted that Japanese teammates tended to be more cautious and detail-oriented, whereas Taiwanese students were more comfortable proposing creative or broader conceptual ideas. These

differences sometimes led to negotiation but ultimately contributed to deeper reflection, as students learned to articulate their perspectives more clearly and consider alternative viewpoints.

#### 4.1.4. Teamwork and Leadership Development

Many Taiwanese students experienced personal growth through team collaboration. Some stepped into leadership roles, guiding discussions or facilitating communication among team members. Others learned to work more collaboratively, respecting each member's strengths and adjusting to diverse working paces. Students repeatedly emphasized in interviews that the most valuable learning was not just "about Japan" or "about revitalization," but about "learning how to work with people from different cultural backgrounds."

The co-design process of community proposals also encouraged students to consider feasibility. Whereas initial ideas were broad or idealistic, discussions with community stakeholders compelled students to revise their proposals and incorporate practical considerations. This shift from abstract brainstorming to context-sensitive problem solving was a major learning outcome.

In reflecting on the workshop structure, Taiwanese students also offered several practical suggestions for improvement. Some felt that the lack of shared accommodation reduced opportunities to build group cohesion, especially compared to the Japan workshop, where living together accelerated team bonding. Others noted that uneven language proficiency occasionally hindered participation, indicating the need for stronger translation support or bilingual materials. Students also felt that the tight schedule limited the time available for deeper reflection or integrating stakeholder feedback into their proposals. Several expressed a desire for more sustained post-workshop activities or follow-up guidance to continue developing their ideas beyond the short program.

## 4.2. Japanese Students' Learning Experiences

### 4.2.1. Encountering Taiwan's Coastal and Cultural Diversity

Japanese students participating in the 2025 Taiwan workshop were deeply impressed by the cultural richness and diversity of Taiwan's coastal communities. The close relationships between schools, community organizations, and fisheries-based industries impressed them the most. Many participants expressed surprise at the warmth, openness, and hospitality shown by local residents, which helped them feel welcomed and comfortable despite the language barriers.

Through field visits, Japanese students gained exposure to the lived experiences of Taiwanese coastal communities, including the challenges of sustaining traditional industries, maintaining cultural identity, and navigating the complexities of rural education. These observations allowed them to compare Taiwanese contexts with those of rural Japan, prompting reflection on similarities and differences in community needs.

### 4.2.2. Shifts in Cultural Perspective and Self-Understanding

Several Japanese students reported in interviews that their experiences in Taiwan challenged preconceived notions about cultural differences. They initially assumed that Taiwanese and Japanese revitalization

contexts would be similar due to shared demographic challenges. Still, they soon realized that Taiwan's local culture, community structures, and educational systems introduced unique dynamics. Students commented that Taiwan's revitalization efforts appeared more closely tied to school programs and youth engagement, whereas Japan's model emphasized long-term community governance and municipal planning.

These insights led students to reflect on their own communities back in Japan. Some mentioned that their hometowns faced similar issues but lacked the strong partnerships between schools and community organizations seen in Taiwan. This comparative perspective strengthened students' sense of place and heightened their awareness of regional assets and challenges within their home contexts.

#### 4.2.3. Intercultural Collaboration and Adaptation

Japanese students also encountered communication challenges. Many expressed initial hesitation speaking English, Mandarin, or even simplified Japanese to their Taiwanese peers. However, they found that Taiwanese students were supportive and encouraging, which eased their anxiety. Over time, Japanese students became more willing to express their ideas and take initiative in team discussions.

Several Japanese students, in interviews, reflected that they had initially relied too heavily on Japanese during group work, unintentionally limiting opportunities for Taiwanese students to practice English. This realization made them more conscious of adjusting their communication strategies, and they began making efforts to use simpler English or slower speech so that both sides could participate more equally in discussions. Students noted that this awareness was an important form of self-growth, as it helped them recognize the need for mutual accommodation in cross-cultural teamwork.

Some Japanese participants also mentioned that while the structured schedule provided helpful guidance, they would have liked more unstructured time to engage in deeper group discussions. They felt that additional space for peer-to-peer negotiation would have allowed them to explore ideas more fully, integrate diverse viewpoints, and take greater ownership over the proposal development process. This reflection highlighted their desire for a balance between instructor-led activities and student-driven collaboration.

Team collaboration highlighted cultural differences in working styles. Japanese students tended to prefer structured planning and incremental progress, while Taiwanese students were more comfortable generating multiple options quickly. Despite these contrasts, students agreed that the combination created productive synergy, with each group contributing complementary strengths.

#### 4.2.4. Learning from Community–School–Industry Linkages

Japanese students found Taiwan's "community–school linkage model" particularly inspiring. They noted that local elementary schools served as centers of cultural preservation and community engagement, and that teachers played active roles in connecting students to the local traditions. This approach broadened Japanese students' understanding of how education can contribute to regional revitalization, and they expressed interest in learning how similar collaborations might strengthen their home communities.

They were particularly impressed by how Taiwanese elementary schools collaborated closely with community elders, local artisans, and cultural practitioners to co-design learning activities. Students observed classes in

which children learned local history directly from community members, participated in traditional craft making, or engaged in place-based environmental projects. These experiences demonstrated to Japanese students how schools in Taiwan function not only as educational institutions but also as hubs that sustain cultural transmission and strengthen community identity.

### **4.3. Shared Learning Themes Across Taiwanese and Japanese Students**

#### **4.3.1. Mutual Recognition of Cultural Differences and Similar Challenges**

A major theme emerging across both groups was the recognition that Taiwan and Japan face similar revitalization challenges—aging populations, declining industries, and youth outmigration—yet approach them through different cultural lenses. Rather than remaining at an abstract level, students articulated how these differences were reflected in practice. For instance, Taiwanese communities were often described as prioritizing industrial development and tourism as key drivers of revitalization, whereas Japanese contexts emphasized population sustainability and the maintenance of community relationships. These differences were further reflected in students' approaches to action, with Taiwanese participants tending to propose more economically oriented strategies. In contrast, Japanese participants focused more on resident-centered and relational approaches. Students from both countries commented in interviews that comparing the two contexts deepened their understanding of sustainability and broadened their awareness of alternative development models.

#### **4.3.2. Growth in Intercultural Communication Competence**

Both Taiwanese and Japanese students experienced noticeable growth in their ability to communicate across languages and cultural norms. They learned to navigate misunderstandings, adjust communication strategies, and interpret non-verbal cues. Students repeatedly emphasized that intercultural competence was one of the most significant learning outcomes of the workshops. Quantitative results from the Japanese cohort also supported these reflections. Post-program surveys showed the largest gains in interpersonal interaction, collaborative planning, reflective thinking, and the intention to take concrete action. These improvements suggest that the workshop's cross-cultural structure created meaningful opportunities for Japanese participants to expand their communication skills and deepen their engagement in community-based problem-solving.

#### **4.3.3. Increased Awareness of Feasibility and Community Realities**

Through field interactions, students from both countries developed a stronger sense of feasibility. Initial proposals were often creative but unrealistic; for example, some groups initially suggested large-scale tourism marketing campaigns or infrastructure upgrades that exceeded the community's financial and organizational capacity. After conversations with community stakeholders, these ideas were revised into more feasible, small-scale actions—such as designing locally guided walking tours, developing simple educational activities for elementary school students, or proposing community-based storytelling materials that could be implemented with existing resources.

This shift from abstract and idealized solutions to context-sensitive and actionable plans demonstrated their growing ability to connect theory with practice, a core competency in sustainability education.

Despite these gains, Taiwanese students scored lower on survey items related to responsibility toward unfamiliar communities. Several students explained in interviews that the short duration of the workshop limited their ability to build trust and sustained relationships with residents, making it difficult to develop a deeper sense of long-term community obligation. This suggests that certain civic dispositions may require extended engagement beyond a brief field immersion.

#### 4.3.4. Enhanced Sense of Place and Community Connectedness

Experiencing real communities—walking through towns, meeting local leaders, and participating in cultural activities—strengthened students' emotional connection to place. Many expressed a deeper appreciation of coastal environments, traditional industries, and the value of community resilience. This enhanced sense of place contributed to their motivation to engage in future community-oriented work.

### 4.4. Instructor Observations

#### 4.4.1. Observations on Student Growth

Instructor reflections provided further insight into how students progressed throughout the workshops. Teachers reported that students demonstrated significant improvement in communication, adaptability, and critical thinking. They observed that, over time, students became more willing to take risks, ask questions, and participate actively in mixed-nationality discussions. Cross-cultural teamwork functioned as both a challenge and an opportunity: although linguistic and cultural differences occasionally slowed progress, they ultimately contributed to richer dialogue and deeper learning.

Instructors from Taiwan and Japan also noted meaningful differences in their pedagogical orientations. Taiwanese instructors tended to adopt a more interventionist approach—providing direct guidance during field visits and team discussions. In contrast, Japanese instructors favored a facilitative, observation-based role that encouraged students to explore issues independently. Combining these approaches enriched the learning experience by exposing students to multiple modes of engagement.

#### 4.4.2. Pedagogical Challenges in Cross-Cultural Facilitation

Teachers also highlighted the complexities of facilitating cross-cultural programs. Full English instruction was demanding for many students, requiring additional visual aids, simplified explanations, and repeated clarification. Instructors noted that translation between English, Mandarin, and Japanese occasionally produced subtle meaning gaps that affected how well students understood community histories or local concerns.

Differences in students' language proficiency and prior knowledge further contributed to uneven participation during team tasks, prompting instructors to adjust lesson pacing, scaffold group work, and provide differentiated support throughout the workshop.

#### 4.4.3. Challenges in Recruiting Rural Students and Instructor Reflections

Both workshops were conducted in rural areas characterized by geographic remoteness and limited economic development. While the program aimed to engage with such communities, one instructor emphasized the

challenges of recruiting students from rural backgrounds. As the workshops were offered as elective courses, participation required additional time commitment beyond regular academic responsibilities.

In practice, students from rural areas were less likely to enroll, often due to competing responsibilities such as family obligations, academic workload, or the need for part-time employment. This highlighted the structural barriers that can limit participation in community-based learning, particularly for those who may already be closely connected to similar contexts.

Despite these difficulties, instructors agreed that the workshops successfully strengthened Taiwan–Japan higher education collaboration and provided meaningful, context-rich experiences that deepened students' understanding of sustainability and regional revitalization.

#### **4.5. Summary**

Overall, the findings reveal that cross-cultural field-based workshops can significantly deepen students' understanding of sustainability, community development, and intercultural collaboration. Both Taiwanese and Japanese students gained valuable insights through direct engagement with local communities, collaborative problem solving, and comparative reflection across national contexts. The workshops not only facilitated cognitive learning but also fostered personal transformation, enhanced communication competence, and strengthened students' sense of responsibility toward regional revitalization.

### **5. Discussion**

Through field engagement in Taiwan and Japan, students developed a more nuanced appreciation of local contexts, community needs, and the constraints and possibilities of revitalization initiatives. These outcomes highlight the value of structured experiential learning situated within long-term partnerships between higher education institutions, consistent with established theories of experiential learning and sustainability competencies (Kolb, 1984; Wiek et al., 2011).

#### **5.1. Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning and Sustainability Competencies**

Students' reflections show that direct engagement with Taiwanese and Japanese communities helped them connect demographic changes, cultural identity, and local development issues to broader sustainability concerns. This learning pattern aligns with research emphasizing the effectiveness of experiential and place-based pedagogies in fostering systems thinking and environmental responsibility (Sipos et al., 2008; Sterling, 2010). Survey results also reveal strong environmental action, which echoes findings in the community-engaged learning literature (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

However, students' lower scores in areas such as family discussions on the environment and responsibility toward unfamiliar communities suggest that certain civic dispositions may require more sustained interaction to develop fully—a dynamic often observed in short-term sustainability programs (Brundiens & Wiek, 2017). Notably, the cross-cultural structure of these workshops contributed an added layer rarely emphasized in single-country studies: Students developed sustainability competencies not only through

local immersion but also by comparing how different socio-cultural systems shape sustainability challenges and responses. This comparative dimension represents an important contribution to sustainability pedagogy.

### **5.2. Intercultural Negotiation and Communication**

Intercultural communication emerged as a core aspect of students' learning. Participants encountered linguistic imbalance, differing communication styles, and unfamiliar team norms. These challenges encouraged greater attention to turn-taking, clarity, and mutual respect—behaviors associated with the development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Vande Berg et al., 2012). The trilingual environment added complexity but also promoted deeper cultural awareness as students adjusted their pace, clarified meanings, and distributed communicative responsibilities.

Consistent with relational perspectives on intercultural learning, competence in this study emerged through sustained negotiation and adaptation rather than immersion alone (Bennett, 2013; Hung, 2022). As students learned to bridge cultural gaps, they also developed trust and stronger collaborative relationships within mixed-nationality teams.

### **5.3. Cross-National Perspectives on Regional Revitalization**

The workshops enabled students to compare revitalization practices across Taiwan and Japan, prompting them to reconsider assumptions about community development. Observations in Japan highlighted the value of long-term partnerships, gradual progress, and community autonomy, while field visits in Taiwan emphasized cultural identity, school–community collaboration, and SDG-oriented planning. These contrasting experiences reflect broader research showing how policy histories and cultural norms shape revitalization trajectories (Akaike, 2019; C. Y. Lin, 2021; Tsai, 2023).

Students also voiced concerns about tourism pressure, community consent, and the feasibility of externally designed proposals—issues commonly raised in critiques of revitalization efforts that fail to incorporate local priorities (Her, 2022; Liu, 2019).

Unlike conventional revitalization research that addresses policy or institutional perspectives, this study demonstrates how student-led field immersion can surface ethical considerations—such as community voice and feasibility—at an earlier stage of learning. This highlights the pedagogical potential of cross-national immersion for developing more socially responsible understandings of revitalization.

This may also reflect a change in how students approach these issues. Instead of focusing mainly on proposing solutions, many students placed more emphasis on listening to the community and adjusting their ideas based on local feedback.

### **5.4. Faculty Collaboration and Pedagogical Considerations**

Faculty members navigated institutional differences, curricular timelines, and cultural norms while facilitating the workshops—experiences consistent with scholarship on transdisciplinary and community-engaged sustainability education (Brundiers & Wiek, 2017; Pless et al., 2011). Coordination across national systems

required attention to language balance, preparatory scaffolding, such as structured guidance and support to help students engage with complex tasks, and communication with community partners, patterns frequently observed in global service-learning and cross-border teaching initiatives (Crabtree, 2008; Lee et al., 2024).

These pedagogical demands emphasize the need for intentional instructional design, including pre-departure briefings, bilingual materials, and structured reflection activities that help students navigate compressed timelines and cross-cultural environments. Faculty reflections in this study demonstrate that well-designed supports can reduce barriers and enable students to engage more meaningfully with community contexts.

### **5.5. Implications for Higher Education and Sustainability Practice**

The study illustrates how short-term, well-structured cross-cultural workshops can advance sustainability learning by helping students develop environmental awareness, civic responsibility, and intercultural communication skills. These outcomes align with sustainability education frameworks that emphasize experiential pedagogies and competencies for action (Brundiers et al., 2020; Sterling, 2010).

The findings also underscore the value of embedding experiential programs within longstanding institutional partnerships. The stability, shared objectives, and ongoing collaboration within the TJA helped create conditions that enhanced learning and community engagement—a trend consistent with studies examining international networks for regional revitalization (Tsai, 2023; Wang, 2020).

Furthermore, students' reflections on feasibility, community consent, and the risks of tourism-driven development highlight the importance of ethical engagement. These concerns echo scholarship warning against extractive approaches to community-based initiatives, particularly those involving external actors or students (Her, 2022; C. Y. Lin, 2021). Facilitated reflection played a crucial role in helping students critically engage with these issues and develop more context-sensitive understandings of community-based sustainability practice.

Finally, the workshops demonstrate how universities can function as intermediaries in sustainability transitions by linking international partners, local communities, and academic programs. This role aligns with theoretical perspectives positioning higher education institutions as key actors capable of bridging knowledge systems and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration for sustainable development (Goddard et al., 2013; Trencher et al., 2014).

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined how two Taiwan–Japan cross-cultural regional revitalization workshops supported students' learning in sustainability, intercultural communication, and community engagement. Using interviews, observations, and course artifacts, the research traced how students interpreted local issues, navigated cultural differences, and developed feasibility-oriented thinking during intensive field immersion.

Across both workshops, students demonstrated the capacity to connect local experiences with broader sustainability questions. Rather than focusing solely on tourism or economic development, they learned to recognize the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape revitalization efforts. Team-based

work in mixed-nationality groups further encouraged students to negotiate meaning, coordinate responsibilities, and adapt communication strategies, deepening their understanding of collaboration in multicultural settings.

The workshops also highlighted the importance of long-term institutional partnerships in supporting effective international experiential programs. Faculty coordination, community engagement, and curricular alignment were essential to enabling students to engage meaningfully within compressed timeframes. These findings illustrate how universities can function as relational bridges—linking local communities, international collaborators, and sustainability-oriented educational practices.

Several implications emerge from this study. For higher education, the results suggest that structured cross-cultural field programs can effectively cultivate place-based awareness and action-oriented competencies, particularly when supported by reflective scaffolding and sustained institutional collaboration. For community partners, the workshops demonstrate how international student engagement—when approached respectfully and collaboratively—can generate new perspectives on local challenges. More broadly, the study emphasizes the value of comparative field immersion for helping students understand the diversity of revitalization pathways across cultural and policy contexts.

This research is not without limitations. The short duration of the workshops restricted the depth of community immersion, and the small number of interview participants limits the generalizability of the findings. Linguistic differences and the trilingual learning environment also influenced how students expressed and interpreted their experiences. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs, expand to additional institutions, or examine how sustained participation in transnational programs shapes students' long-term civic engagement and sustainability practices.

Overall, this study contributes to growing scholarship on sustainability education by showing how international, community-based learning environments can foster both comparative understanding and intercultural competence. As universities increasingly engage with regional revitalization and cross-border collaboration, such models offer valuable insights into how higher education can support more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to sustainable development.

This study contributes to the literature in both theoretical and practical ways. Theoretically, it extends existing research on sustainability education and experiential learning by demonstrating how cross-cultural, community-based immersion can support the development of action competence, feasibility awareness, and ethical engagement. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators and institutions designing short-term international programs, highlighting the importance of structured support, cross-cultural facilitation, and sustained institutional partnerships to enhance student learning and community engagement.

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## Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Kuei-Chao Chang (National Academy of Marine Research).

## Data Availability

The data is not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations.

## LLMs Disclosure

Large language model (LLM) tools (e.g., ChatGPT) were used for language editing and translation support.

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