

21st Century Higher Education in Japan

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Higher education in Japan is on the verge of entering a new era. There, an aging society and declining birth rate are growing at a globally unprecedented rate. The population of 18-year-olds is decreasing rapidly, and even if the percentage of applicants for institutions of higher education increase, their number of applicants is forecast to decrease. Statistically speaking, next year in 2007, the capacity (i.e., number of applicants) at universities and junior colleges will reach 100%¹.

Foreseeing this situation, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) started trying to discover the best solution so as to cope with this crisis in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the Ministry released specific policy plans and tasks successively. In these, it attempted to create an environment in which each university would be able to operate in a more independent and autonomous manner. In other words, in a *laissez-faire* way. For the university itself, characteristic educational and research activities need to be developed in accordance with its ideas and aims and efforts are being made to build “distinctive universities” which are internationally competitive.

At any rate, in a more competitive environment for every institution of higher education, whether national or private, challenges

are needed to work out their own strategy for its survival and to constantly make its own efforts.

Today, I shall take the case of Komazawa Women’s University where I work, as a typical private university in Japan. Like other universities, mine is trying its best through self-effort means. Through our experiences, I would like to look at higher education in Japan and to point out some problems.

1. Why I come to Mongolia every year.

Every year since 2003, I have come to Mongolia with my students. A few days ago, my students and another professor returned to Japan after a 12-day study tour. During their stay, they visited many places, such as elementary schools, big and small enterprises, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Japanese Embassy, the Japan-Mongol Center and so on and met many people in their investigations. This was a study and lecture tour having two main aims.

Firstly, their visit was to understand the Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) including human resources here. The participants of this study are interested in the work of ODA and NGOs and hope to work

for JICA or an NGO in the future. At this present moment, Japan is the biggest aid-giving nation in Mongolia and many kinds of NGOs are actively involved here. For example, we can see many buses on the streets carrying Mongolian-Japanese cooperation stickers as well as on the television sets in classrooms. Also, they could meet young Japanese volunteers in schools and older ones in a power plant.

The second aim of this study was to interact with Mongolian university students. Every year, both Mongolian and Japanese students stay together in a typical Mongolian tent, a gel and discuss many topics, such as street children, ODA, the present international situation and so on. In 2004, Otgontenger University together with mine, signed a mutual cooperation agreement including a student exchange program. At present, Komazawa Women's University has two Mongolian students, one a graduate and the other an undergraduate, both of whose tuition is free. For three years, we have built up human relations in Mongolia gradually and steadily.

So as to operate these study tours, my university receives financial assistance from the Japanese government. This kind of subsidy started in 2003 and I shall now explain more about such financial assistance to private universities within Japan.

2. Subsidy Programs to Private Universities in Japan

In Japan, the major national financial measures for higher education include the

budget for national universities, tax allocations for such local universities and subsidies for current expenditure of private institutions of higher education, as well as scholarship loans to students, grants-in-aid for scientific researchers and so on².

As for private universities and other private institutions of higher education, in accordance with the spirit of the Private School Promotion Subsidy Law, projects are being undertaken to maintain and improve education and research conditions, and to reduce the economic burden on students with respect to their studies and so on.

With these aims in mind, the national government has tried to advance the promotion of private institutions by implementing various measures such as assistance programs, focusing on supporting the running costs of private institutions.

In 2003, MEXT created the Special Assistance for Promoting the Advancement of the Educational & Research of the Private University program³ with the intention of developing world-class private universities. Under this, universities need only to pay 50% of the cost of a particular program. Komazawa Women's University applied for this and its theme was to investigate the methods, encouraging university students to participate in international or regional community services and various related programs. A committee selects and screens these applications on a yearly basis. My theme was chosen in 2003 and my university was then provided with financial support for that year. Such programmes can continue for a maximum of

4 years if they are deemed suitable.

Using this subsidy, several lectures on international cooperation have been held up to now and a volunteer section has been established this year at my university. As mentioned previously, Otagotenger University and Komazawa Women's University concluded a friendship agreement. In near future, we shall give one credit for a student's volunteer activity.

Now, I would like to explain the Educational Reform Plan for the 21st century, which allows my university to attempt new programs.

3. Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century

In 2000, the Japanese Prime Minister established the National Commission on Education Reform and submitted a report. Based on this, MEXT released its Educational Reform Plan for the 21st century⁴. This plan established an overall vision for education reform and indicated specific policy plans and tasks which needed to be tackled. Following this, in 2004, MEXT announced an education reform plan entitled "Japan! Rise Again!" proposing the objectives of education which was to encourage dedication and effort⁵.

As far as higher education is concerned, the 1998 University Council's "A Report Vision for Universities in the 21st Century and Reform Measures⁶" indicated the following four basic philosophies of reform, namely, qualitative enhancement of education and research; securing the autonomy of univer-

sities; improvement of administrative structures; and the establishment of a plural evaluation system. According to this report, each university needed to be autonomous, with a view to how higher education can appropriately fulfill its important role as the basis that supports Japanese society.

In addition, in recent years, Japan has attached greater importance to education in ODA. This has been trying to contribute to the realization of "Education for All" based on its "Basic Education for Growth Initiative (BEGIN)⁷," which was announced at the G8 Summit in 2002. The three priority areas of BEGIN are access to education; quality of education and the management of education. Last year, MEXT produced an international strategy and expressed the need to strengthen Japan's presence in the world and to have a partnership with Asian countries. In short, MEXT is starting to collaborate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this strategy, all Japanese universities are requested as well to increase international competitiveness, improve the quality of education and train people who can take an active role in the international arena.

4. Conclusion

Lastly, as described above, in a competitive environment as in Japan, institutions of higher education possessing various characteristics can provide learning opportunities to anybody. In particular, I would like to mention universities which undertake the role of concentrating not only on education, but as

centers of academic research. These also need to promote a knowledge base and a means of how to teach people in a particular research field. In addition, all universities in Japan are expected to be a means to support industrial competitiveness and ensure employment because it is essential to enhance the intellectual capacity of each of its citizens and maintain it. Also they need the vitality of the country.

Higher education in Japan is facing a mixture of expectations and anxieties. All universities are expected to make use of their individual characteristics and clarify their outlook for their own future. Responding to social structural change, universities are also at the stage where they need to construct a new image of themselves.

In my conclusion, I think too many expectations are being placed on universities in Japan. As a result, in recent years, many professors, particularly in private universities, have been complaining about having a great deal of office work, which has interfered with education and research. I am afraid that many universities get their priorities wrong. Real competitiveness among these institutions must lie in education and research. By having such competitiveness, universities could then survive.

In addition to this, I am afraid of American influence on higher education in Japan. Since World War II, Japanese government has introduced American system of doing things, especially in public policy. As described above, the Educational Reform Plan for the 21st century follows the American model. I

think education is very important for every nation state. Therefore, in this respect, Japanese should now stop and think before entering the next stage.

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- 1 http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/koutou/027/siryo/06021607/001.html
- 2 http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusyo/html/hpac200401/hpac200401_2_162html
- 3 http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kouhou/shinkou/0505060/html
- 4 <http://www.mext.go.jp/topics/21plan/016301.html>
- 5 <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/statist/05101901/002pdf>
- 6 http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusyo/html/hpac200201/hpac200301_2_038.html
- 7 http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/14106/020617html

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