

University Education in Japan: Some Suggestions for Reform

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Although Japan has succeeded in providing an improved quality of life for its people over the last 50 years, dramatic shifts in population growth, global economic competition, environmental degradation, arcane governance procedures, concern about declining moral standards, and rapid technological development are eroding public confidence. Within this context, university education is also facing a critical moment, being pressed by declining student applications, reduced government funding, and global competition. How should universities in Japan adapt themselves to nurture leaders capable of guiding the nation and the world toward a more promising future?

IN response to this problem, reforms are currently underway at every university, many under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), but most efforts have to do with improving assessment procedures, competing for limited government funds by devising new curricula, and making universities more responsive to business interests, whether in research collaboration or in training future employees. This market model of university education certainly has merit in this time of limited resources, but there have been few efforts to re-think the fundamental values and potentials of post-secondary education in this rapidly changing world. Universities have the potential to be at the forefront in society's search for economic and environmental security, humane technological innovation, ethical practices, and international cooperation. In fact, they have a responsibility to nurture competent participants in these efforts.

What follows are some suggestions for innovations in Japanese university education, which I believe would go a long

way toward moving society in a positive direction. Depending on the organizational structure and tradition of each institution, these ideas may take time to implement, but there is growing recognition that fundamental reforms are the key to helping education play an active role in creating a better life for all.

Strengthen General Education

There is a widespread effort to improve the quality of research and education in the major academic specialties, but most Japanese universities do not have an integrated core curriculum which is treated as an essential element of each student's course of study. As the building blocks for critical thinking and appreciation of the world's cultural and natural resources, general education or *kyoyo* courses should be rescued from their current position of disrespect, and strengthened to equip citizens of the 21st century.

Job skills required for specific careers will change ever more rapidly in the coming years, so it is essential that one's foundational education can assist in navigating the altering landscape. Communication skills such as public speaking, writing, and reading technical documents (preferably in English as well as Japanese), techniques to find and analyze information, and skills for intercultural understanding, to get along with others of different age, sex, religion, and nationality, are just some examples of skills that will be useful regardless of one's academic major or future career path.

In addition to these foundation courses dealing with subjects such as communication and research methods, a core curriculum should include classes in which students can explore the world's cultural heritage through philosophy, religion, history, literature, and the arts. By studying the humanities with a critical eye, students can try to decipher the meaning of human civilization and consider their own roles in the world. A university education should provide the opportunity and resources for students to reflect on their lives.

Each institution should design a core curriculum which represents its values and identity. Most of the private schools in Japan have strong traditions based on their founding principles. For example, there are 75 universities nationwide with a Christian heritage, so these could focus some core courses on Christian values such as human rights, peace, justice, and environmental protection. Of course, those institutional values would also serve as the basis for designing ethics courses relevant to each discipline.

Recruit a Broader Spectrum of Students & Faculty Members

Due to a precipitous drop in the birthrate since the 1970s, the number of 18-year-olds, who make up the primary applicant pool for Japanese universities, has plunged from a high of nearly 2.5 million in 1966 to 1.3 million in 2007. During the same period of time, the number of universities more than doubled from 317 in 1965 to 756 in 2007. Therefore, in order to attract an adequate number of applicants, universities

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must be more open to nontraditional students. In other words, they must provide attractive curricula for people of all ages, as well as nationalities.

Only a handful of Japanese universities provide degree programs completely in English. This may have been a satisfactory situation in the past, but now, in order to be recognized as a world-class institution, faculty and students must be attracted from around the world, and if classes are conducted only in Japanese, the number of international participants will be severely limited. Japanese students too must be encouraged to participate in classes taught in English, thus expanding their intercultural experiences and increasing their confidence to take on international roles.

In addition to meaningful and challenging curricula, nontraditional students may need different types of support from universities. For example, parents of young children may not be able to attend classes without the availability of childcare facilities, or may wish to work toward a degree on a part-time basis, and international students have many concerns specific to their situation. Currently, university programs are designed with native, full-time, 18- to 22-year-olds in mind, so broadening the pool of prospective students will require major accommodations, but involving the whole university community in addressing such problems will most surely result in creative solutions.

■ Provide Links Off-Campus

To make university education relevant to today's society, it cannot be constrained within the confines of traditional

campuses. Distance learning must be developed more fully as technology expands the realm of possibilities. Opening online classes to students nationwide, or even worldwide, is no longer an unusual feat in the West. Students in remote areas, those with disabilities, unusual hours, or restrictive responsibilities, can all be served through well-designed distance learning programs.

In addition to the traditional international partnership system that links institutions in different countries for collaborative research or student exchange, universities can also forge ties with local communities, businesses, government agencies, and research institutes to achieve common goals, as well as to provide students with opportunities for hands-on internships and service learning. Although care needs to be taken to assure that relationships involving financial gain truly serve all the parties, participation in study abroad, community development projects, or humanitarian programs can transform students' perspectives toward learning, and motivate them in their studies. These are also important ways in which universities can demonstrate their social responsibility.

If designed carefully, service-learning programs are effective means of empowering both the students and community members involved. For example, my institution, Kwansei Gakuin University, has been actively involved in the United Nations Information Technology Service (UNITeS) volunteer program, which sends university students to developing countries in order to assist with information technology transfer. The

students must complete extensive training on campus before departing for their assigned sites, and then must work in close conjunction with the local people there before submitting, upon their return, a detailed evaluation to reflect on their efforts. In most cases, it is a challenging but rewarding learning experience, which significantly broadens the students' perspectives and improves the lives of the local residents as well.

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■ Building a Learning Community

To accomplish these and other reforms, public consciousness in Japan must be raised to expect more from university education. In recent years, the focus of education worldwide has been turning to learning rather than teaching. Students must arrive ready to participate actively in the learning community, while faculty and staff must provide a stimulating environment and regular feedback to enhance learning.

Before Japanese university education can achieve its potential to participate in building a brighter future, many radical changes will have to be made. However, reforms have already begun at many institutions, and the severe competition is forcing even sanguine administrations to reevaluate their policies. I believe there are many underutilized resources on university campuses, and it will be exciting to see how creative the stakeholders can be to achieve their mission.

J.S.

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