

Japanese Higher Education Reform: The University Council Report

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In October 1998, an important report on Japanese higher education, entitled *Universities at the Turn of the 21st Century: Plans for Reform*, was issued by the University Council (*Daigaku shingikai*). This report calls for sweeping changes in the higher education system.

For anyone interested in Japanese higher education, the report is noteworthy because it sets forth the goals of reform, and the basis for their implementation. For non-Japanese readers, this article combines an outline of the main points covered in the report with mention of some “traditional” characteristics of Japanese higher education.

Undergraduate Education

Japanese universities are said to be difficult to get into and easy to graduate from. Attending a university is very important, while what is learned at university is less so. Thus companies look only at which universities job applicants graduated from and not at their actual academic records. Universities are not perceived as truly educating students. For their part, students treat university as a place to rest four years after the pressures of the entrance examinations. Typically, students take only easy classes in the first three years and spend the fourth year job hunting. An undergraduate education does not require students to study hard.

In addition to this “tradition,” Japanese higher education faces another problem: the decline in size of the cohort of 18-year-olds. By 2009, the number of students seeking admission will equal to the total quota for all universities, which means all will be accepted unless they select the most competitive institutions. Many academics worry that the quality of education will suffer in the next few decades, because strict entrance examinations to keep standards high will become ineffective.

The report urged each university to adopt more rigorous grading policies—such as requiring written assignments, papers, and class attendance—and by limiting the number of credits undergraduates can earn each year. If they prove to be effective, these policies would represent important changes in the traditional Japanese university. However, such steps have been discussed before without concrete results. Also, if each university

introduced a strict grading policy, a significant number of students would be unable to graduate in four years, creating a serious social problem. These are some of the issues making this one of the most difficult parts of the reform agenda.

Graduate Education

Unlike its approach regarding undergraduate education, the report calls for graduate education to expand. It has often been noted that the scale of graduate education in Japan has lagged behind that in the United States. That was because in Japan graduate schools were considered to be institutions solely for the training of future academics. The report proposed that graduate education be opened up to include master’s degree programs for people in midcareer to improve their professional skills and knowledge. This would also entail establishing professional schools comparable to business or law schools in the United States.

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Establishing a Flexible System

The report advocates that the education system be deregulated and reduce the excessive homogeneity among universities. Current regulations, for example, decree that an undergraduate degree requires four years (except in medicine) and that the master’s degree requires two years. Under the proposed reforms, students who excelled could graduate in less than four years, according to standards set by each university. Universities would also be able to offer one-year master’s programs.

Another area being discussed is the credit transfer system. It will be made easier for students to enroll in courses at other universities or to transfer to other institutions. Students will be able to earn up to 60 credits from other universities, instead of the current 30 credits.

The academic year will also be subject to change. All levels of education in Japan start in April and end in March, and many university courses last for a whole one-year term (not just a semester). This sometimes makes it difficult for students and scholars to participate freely in academic exchanges and other programs abroad. If institutions adopt the semester system and admit students in the fall, these problems could be solved to some degree.

Strengthening the Decision-Making Process

Each school or faculty within Japanese universities is an autonomous unit. Each faculty council has considerable decision-making power. To reform Japanese universities as drastically as envisioned, however, this tradition would seem to be an obstacle. Thus, the report calls for the introduction of more efficient management systems. Specifically, it asks universities to limit the authority of faculty councils to matters involving each school's education and research and to give presidents and deans more executive power. Academics are resisting such changes as intrusions into academic autonomy.

Creating an Evaluation System

These proposed reforms in the quality of education and the strengthening of decision-making procedures will require constant evaluation. This was the final point in the report and has become the most controversial topic among academics. Japanese universities, especially the national universities, are closely monitored by the Ministry of Education. Since 1992, universities have been required to be assessed by internal committees. However, while most have performed self-evaluations and have issued many assessment reports, it is doubtful that these exercises really contribute to true reform. The 1998 report strongly emphasizes the need for outside evaluations, recommending establishing third-party monitoring committees consisting of professors (not under the auspices of the Ministry of Education).

This evaluation would be used to determine distribution of government spending on education and research. This could also prove to be problematic: universities with high evaluations would attract students and resources, while poorly evaluated universities with low evaluations would suffer. This could produce changes in the rankings of some institutions.

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Conclusion

The report originated out of a sense of crisis over the future of Japanese higher education in the 21st century. These are the most radical reforms proposed in Japanese higher education since World War II. If Japanese universities are able to carry out these ambitious reforms they will be well positioned to meet the challenges of the 21st century. ■

Despite Asian Turmoil International Enrollment in the United States Grows in 1997

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The number of foreign students studying in the United States increased substantially in 1997–98. This year's total of 481,280 represents an increase of 5.1 percent over last year's figure, building on last year's near 1 percent increase and appears to reverse a six-year trend of declining foreign student enrollments. These findings and others are reported in the 1997/98 edition of *Open Doors*.

This 1997–98 increase reflects enrollment growth from 13 of the 15-largest source countries and exceptional growth from three countries: Korea, China, and India. By contrast, last year, 7 of the 15 leading places of origin showed declines in enrollment, while the other 8 showed only slight to moderate growth. More than half (57 percent) of the 23,000-student increase comes from Korea, China, and India. While the United States hosts international students from virtually all international homelands, there is a marked concentration of enrollments from particular places. Just over 41 percent of all international students studying in this country come from the leading five places. Japan, China, Korea, India, and Taiwan, collectively, account for 201,000 international students. Indeed the leading 15 homelands, of which 9 are Asian, account for two-thirds of all U.S. international enrollments. (See table on next page.)

While the overall foreign student total is up markedly this year, certain sectors of the higher education system have benefited disproportionately. Between 1993 and 1997 community colleges have shown the strongest growth in international enrollments (19.9 percent) of all institutional types. Within institutional classifications, however, the more selective institutions have shown stronger increases in enrollment than have less selective colleges. Among the most popular fields of study, international enrollments in business (up 4.7 percent), computer science (up 20 percent), and the arts (up 14.7 percent) demonstrated exceptional growth this year.

But What About This Year?

The total number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities appears to be holding steady for the fall 1998 term. The number of institutions reporting either increases in enrollments or no change over 1997 levels exceeded 55 percent for all Asian countries surveyed. An overwhelming proportion of institutions reported en-