

Should Japanese Universities Shift the Academic Calendar?

YUKIKO SHIMMI

Yukiko Shimmi is a graduate research assistant, at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College. E-mail: yshimmi@gmail.com.

An effort to internationalize universities often conflicts with domestic systems, and it is seen at Japanese universities, currently. In Japan, to internationalize the university, a shift of the academic calendar from April to fall (September or October) was suggested by the internal panel of the University of Tokyo, in May 2012. This shift is to align the academic calendar to the world standard. Though this suggestion is still under discussion, major Japanese universities and the Japanese government, as well as industry, have started to discuss the issues and obstacles of implementation. While this suggestion might become a potential symbol of the reform for the internationalization of Japanese higher education, it has highlighted conflicts with traditional and domestic systems in many ways. Shifting the academic calendar faces difficulties at the University of Tokyo and other Japanese universities.

REASONS AND CONCEPTS

The University of Tokyo's internal panel suggested that the university should start its academic calendar in the fall (September or October), within five years,

in order to accelerate the internationalization of higher education across Japan. According to the report, 70 percent of countries in the world start higher education academic years in either September or October (including not only Western countries but also China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan), whereas most Japanese universities start in April. Some Japanese universities already admit students in the fall, but this is not the norm. Therefore, the alignment of the academic calendar with the world standard will help promote international exchanges of students and scholars and increase research collaboration at the university level. With the new academic calendar, students can participate in study-abroad programs for a semester or a year, without conflicting with course schedules or delaying graduation. Professors and researchers will face less constraints regarding teaching or administrative responsibilities, when they hope to conduct research or teach abroad as visiting scholars.

Shifting the academic year also seems to be an effective use of summer break. The current academic calendar prevents students from fully engaging in other activities, during summer—including exchange programs, volunteer positions and internships, especially for students hoping to travel abroad. In addition, shifting the academic calendar also introduces the potential for a “gap term” (six-month break) between high school graduation and university entrance. The benefit of the gap term for students is the opportunity to engage in activities that broaden their perspectives and stimulate their interest through volunteering, studying abroad, and other beneficial uses of their time.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Despite the potential merits of changing the academic year, several challenges for the actual implementation have been raised. These issues seem to be caused from the dilemma between national and international systems. For example, most universities' academic year does not match the schedule of other areas of Japanese society. The Japanese traditional academic calendar, from the pre-kindergarten to the tertiary levels, starts in April and ends in March. Moreover, the government and private sector in Japan start their fiscal year in April and hire a majority of new employees once a year, in April. Also, major certification exams—such as, the public servant, doctor, nurse, and lawyer exams—assume exam takers will start working in April. Many Japanese people prefer the current cycle, with no downtime between high school and college graduations, before they start working. Furthermore, although not relevant for non-Japanese people, beginning the school year of K–12 and college and the annual cherry blossom season is culturally significant among the Japanese.

Another concern is that shifting the academic calendar just at some universities will complicate the situation further. Unlike the University of Tokyo and some other institutions that aim for international competitiveness, most Japanese universities and colleges serve domestic students and, therefore, have no incentive to shift their academic calendar. Also, the major universities considering this shift, do face some disagreement about the method of implementation. For example, Waseda University, a leading private institution, developed a unique solution by partially introducing a quarter system for altering the academic calendar—to promote international exchanges and internationalization of the university.

If only a few universities shift their academic calendar, it could be confusing and problematic for students, the government, companies, and universities. For students who choose to attend universities in Japan that begin in September, their status during the gap term between high school graduation and university entrance is still unclear. The hiring schedule of university graduates at traditional Japanese companies need to become more flexible than the current rigid system, which hires employees only in April, to accommodate varying university graduation dates; otherwise, some students might face disadvantages. Between government and universities, the difference in fiscal year and academic year at some universities might cause issues in budgeting and financial allocation.

ALTERNATIVES AND OTHER PROCEDURES

The University of Tokyo's report, the president of the university, and public opinion seem to agree that higher education internationalization cannot be achieved mainly by shifting of academic year. Rather, shifting the academic calendar should be discussed simultaneously, along with other types of reforms. Thus, to promote studying abroad among Japanese domestic students, the university could emphasize and improve internal support systems—such as securing study-abroad transfer credit, promoting smooth transitions through language preparation and pre- and post-orientations, and providing scholarship opportunities. However, to attract international scholars and students to Japan, the enhancement of educational quality and ways to overcome language barriers might be more critical than shifting the academic calendar. While differing the academic calendar might play a symbolic role in propelling overarching

university reform, not addressing all other potential obstacles will not help the university to build up international competitiveness. Regardless of whether shifting the academic year is implemented or not, the University of Tokyo and other Japanese universities, as well as Japanese society, seriously need to assess the current situation and strategically plan the future direction of Japanese higher education.