

# Problems and Perspectives of Japanese Universities

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As many of us know well, the Japanese university system was dramatically reformed in 1947. Our system switched from the Humboldtian-type research oriented arrangement, which still attracts many researchers, to one structured on the American model. We know that European universities are also going to follow the American model through the Bologna Process, at least on its structure of three-cycle system, but I should mention that our immediate post-war change had not been well understood for at least 20 years.

Today, I will not refer to the discussions of the immediate post-war period, but I want to draw your attention to the many cabinet-level discussions that were held. These include the Ad Hoc Education Reform Council, which worked actively and intensively from 1984 to 1987; the National Conference on Education Reform in 2000; The Conference on the Rebirth of Education from 2006 to 2007; and the subsequent Meeting on the Rebirth of Education from 2008 to 2009. Through these efforts, many reforms were instigated. The revision of the Fundamental Education Act in 2006 was one of the most notable outcomes which was the first amendment after the original enforcement of the Act 60 years before. The new Act reflects the recent situation on the need for lifelong learning, confirms the aims and goals of university education, etc., and the most notably, it stipulates the government's obligation to set up the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education.

Nowadays, universities are required to educate students with high-level knowledge and skills, and this expectation covers not only high-level knowledge of the specified subjects, but also generic skills such as problem-solving ability, critical thinking attitudes, and communication ability. These are traditional Anglo-Saxon views on competency, but I feel something is still missing. One of the typical elements desired is the ability to harmonise. We

need to take the opinions of others seriously, and after a thorough exchange of ideas, we might finally work out the best solution. That is our idea and belief.

It is very interesting that in 2009, on the occasion of the General Conference of UNESCO, Mr. Gurria, the Secretary-General of the OECD, made a speech on the importance of harmonising ability. I understood the context of his speech to be that in times of seeking innovation, we cannot break through using existing ideas by merely repeating what we have learned, and we need to interact with people from different fields to find new ideas that will lead to innovation. Thus, he claimed that we should be equipped with harmonising ability. This is not exactly the idea I had expected, but still, I am happy that this virtue, which has not necessarily been recognised as part of general competence, is now going to be emphasised.

## **1. Efforts to diversify the university**

The expansion of the number of students who attend higher education institutions results in the diversification of higher education. The suppliers, namely universities, have not been sufficiently responsive to the diversified demands. Many countries tried to reform their education systems in 1980s and 1990s, and I gather these movements were preceded by a similar situation.

After these drives, in 1998, the UNESCO organised a ‘World Conference on Higher Education’. This was a kind of consolidation work on the situation at that time, and led to a communiqué on the vision of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper referred to some fundamental issues, for example, quality evaluation, challenges of science and technologies, management and financing, cross border supply, knowledge sharing, and other issues with which we are still coping. In 2009, the UNESCO organised a follow up meeting on higher education, and after summing up the progress in this 10-year period, proposed some ideas on the future of higher education, including the measures for reacting to the needs of innovation. These reports suggest to us the agenda we should tackle, and you might find it interesting to look at them, but at this moment, I would like to touch upon several issues that the Japanese universities are now facing.

## **2. Appeal for more sophistication**

There are two aspects to the issue of sophistication. One is the request for maintaining high research standards, and the other is to aspire to cultivate high-level professionals. This is not a world of sports where the peak will become higher with more players and supporters. However, in our society, the peak does not become higher automatically, so, first of all, we

should cope with the issue of improving the quality of institutions, and then we need to endeavour to maintain the new levels.

As for the sophistication of the research standards, governments and universities have traditionally combined their efforts. In Japan, we are fortunate that we have a special act of parliament for the promotion of science and technology, and by this Act, the government plans five-year schemes for the promotion of them. The Cabinet-based Council for Science and Technology Policy decided on the next five-year scheme last December, in which the Council has requested that the government provide an investment of 25 trillion yen for science and technology within the next five years.

Activities for educating professionals are not yet well developed in this country, and this issue should be enriched further despite the relatively poor experience in our university system. We have started American style professional schools in some fields, but the reality is, they need to struggle against many difficulties. I strongly believe one of the crucial issues for the betterment of our higher education system is how we can implement this professional school mechanism in our society efficiently.

At the same time, we need to turn our attention to the progress of qualification systems in the labour world. The European Qualification Framework, together with the ongoing experience of the National Vocational Qualification awards in England, such are the cases we need to watch carefully, to see how they will be developed in the near future.

In addition, we should pay attention to the OECD's report of the country review of the Japanese higher education system. The review was conducted in 2006, and the report was released in 2009. They observed that our system is still deeply dyed with the traditional Continental European colour.

### **3. Ageing society**

I think one of the big advantages that the higher education sector has, is the opportunities that arise from an ageing society. It is well known that Japan's rapid progress in ageing is one of the 'oldest' in the world. However, many European countries as well as some Asian countries, notably Korea, are in a similar situation. Perhaps many countries around the world will share this issue.

Under these circumstances, it is extremely important to make the utmost use of the advantages of the ageing society. We have finished providing our initial investment in their education. We need not construct new elementary schools, nor hire additional teachers for the newcomers. We have many human resources who completed their basic education, accumulated wisdom, and enriched their practice through experience. So, with a relatively

small investment, by utilising the lifelong learning system, we can refresh these people, who will have many chances of working in many of society's productive activities, bring us economic growth, and more over, in many cases, achieve individual satisfaction in their lives.

Now it is a time for higher education to move on to responding to these demands. With this advantageous situation, I would like to emphasise the importance of enriching the lifelong learning system at the higher education level. Besides, it is far more desirable to establish a holistic policy through the fields concerned, such as education, economic activities, labour issues, social security system, and preferably medical affairs.

#### **4. Career education and liberal arts education**

As we have seen, especially from the aspect of levelling up the quality of education, career education has become one of the crucial issues in education. Many countries have already endeavoured to enrich their education from this perspective. This is also the case in Japan, and the Ministry has set necessary revisions of the 'National Curriculum Standards' for elementary and secondary school education. Moreover, last year, the Ministry revised the 'University Education Standards', by which universities are now required to prepare adequate curriculum and necessary arrangements on this issue.

Nevertheless, the problem is that the common understanding on the contents and useful measures for career education is not still well matured. We are struggling to find out what should be taught and how it can be taught effectively. The general sense of career education could be said 'to cultivate students with the ability to find and decide on the course of their lives by themselves, together with the ability to cope with various problems with a flexible and strong will', or something like that. However, we also need to maintain our efforts to deepen our understanding of this issue, and to find the best ways to enlighten it.

Connected with this agenda, we should pay attention to the OECD's 'AHELO' project. In particular, I am personally interested in how they can evaluate the outcome of generic ability. For the first point, what should be included in 'generic ability'? As I mentioned before, traditionally three elements, namely problem solving ability, critical thinking attitudes, and communication ability are understood to be the main constituents of competence, but I want to reiterate my belief that harmonising ability can be one of the important necessary ingredients for bettering our lives. Second, how should we evaluate this competence is another issue. In planning this project, we still need serious consideration of these issues. Having said this, I advocate the legitimacy of this project, because of the merits of developing this valuable attempt. This trial can be said to be a highly valuable effort to secure a better higher education system throughout the world.

I want to note that one of the difficult university-related questions in Japan is how to select the applicants suitable for their education. The point is that there exists a discrepancy between the expectations of applicants for university places and the services provided by institutions. Of course, one of the serious reasons for this phenomenon is that, in many cases, at the time of application, students cannot decide about their explicit will for their future lives. So they tend to choose their institutions according to their academic scores. On the other hand, universities also tend to choose their students mainly according to their academic scores at the time of their entrance examination. In our society, equity is highly respected, and at the same time, the academic score is perceived as being the best way of ensuring equity in entrance examinations. This belief is so strong that universities almost abandon their attempts to discover better measures for selection. I think we should try to find a way to narrow the expectations gap between applicants and universities. The enrichment of career education could be one of the useful contributions to this issue.

The other item that I want to mention here is the issue of liberal arts education. When we changed our university system after the World War 2, we merged the study of professional subjects of the old university system and liberal arts-related education at the stage of the old high school system, into four-year undergraduate courses. Since then, how to keep liberal arts education has been one of the issues in our university system. In particular, in recent years, to cope with the needs of professional education which have become more and more complicated, liberal arts curricula have been obliged to shrink their school hours. Of course, what should be included in liberal arts in the present university education is not an easy question to answer, nevertheless, it is also clear that we need to prepare for these diversified and complicated issues; hence we need to be equipped with wide and basic knowledge and ideas to tackle the divergent professional requirements. As was demonstrated in the aforementioned Mr. Gurria's words, this is also the problem of the coming of the innovation society. In that sense, I am eager to know what European universities, where the students are supposed to finish their liberal arts education during secondary education, think about this issue.

## **5. Cross-border provision of university education**

The progress of globalisation has had a significant impact on education. The educational reforms of the 1980s, which occurred simultaneously throughout the world, came from a common situation: the expansion of educational activities. Nevertheless, they were not associated with the others' reforms; they were reforms based on their internal requirements and for their own countries' sake. However, as we can see in the case of the UNESCO world conferences, the Cologne G8 summit in 1999, and Saint Petersburg G8 summit in 2006,

education matters have become deeply entwined with the international framework. The establishment of the World Trade Organisation is one of the reasons that led to this situation. This new framework on trade included 'service trade' in their activities. Unlike cultural trade, for which France made a strong claim to set a cultural exception, but failed to do so, there was no discussion on the education trade issue. But in around 2002 when the USA and Australia began to insist strongly on the free trade principle, many countries recognised this issue for the first time.

There could be an argument that education services should be treated differently from trade in material, but it was too late to claim so, because we have been sitting around the free trade table since 1995. Hence, we started seeking measures to protect learners from low quality education services, which resulted in setting up the guidelines for the protection of the quality of cross-border provisions of higher education, by the UNESCO and by the OECD. The UNESCO also started to establish a worldwide clearing house to find out the status of the providers and the kind of services they provide to learners. Of course, the guidelines are not a treaty, and have no compulsory nature, but as a kind of soft law, it provides us with good practices to keep up the quality of the cross-border education services.

The issue of cross-border provision of higher education comes up with how to settle the systems on quality assurance, mutual recognition of the credit or degree. America's accreditation system is well known to us, but in Japan's case, we establish an assurance system at the time the institution is opened, and an evaluation system after the establishment of the institution is still developing. As early as 1946, a foundation for university education standards was established, and one of the objects of which was to act like US accreditation bodies. However, the intention was hard to accomplish, and we needed an additional 50 years for the prevalence of understanding on the importance of evaluation of the outcomes.

In that sense, I am watching carefully how the Bologna Process will lead the environment of evaluation among European universities. They have a long history of establishing various systems such as ERASMUS, ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), ENQA (European Association of Quality Assurance) and so on.

I said watch carefully, because, by my humble observation, the Bologna Process seems to be a kind of political process, and maybe Europe needs substantial unification between the higher education institutions themselves. Anyway, the establishment of the European Higher education Area was officially declared, and we look forward to seeing its progress toward the 2020 target year which accords with the Lisbon Declaration.

Looking at the Asian situation, we are far from the establishment of such a unified foundation. We have a credit transfer system called UMAP, but it is not yet so popular, and we have an Asian area treaty on the mutual recognition of degrees, instructed by the UNESCO

treaty, but Japan is not a member. We have just established common a evaluation system for the Asian universities, but it has just begun its activities. Nevertheless, establishing a holistic system for better cooperation between Asian universities has been becoming a high hope. This year, our government made a budget plan for the promotion of interchanges of university-level activities within our region.

But here, I would like to express my concern about the tendency of running into regionalism. The world of universities should be a worldwide one, as the word university tells us well. To strengthen the cooperation within the region is important, but it should never mean locking ourselves in the region. The advantage of cross-border exchanges, both by research and education activities, should be widely shared throughout world.

## **6. Knowledge management**

Here, I just wanted to draw your attention on the necessity of knowledge management at universities. The word ‘knowledge society’ or ‘knowledge based society’ has been discussed for a long time. Beginning from the wording of Economist Peter Drucker in his book titled ‘The Age of Discontinuity’, the word itself has become so popular. But as was concluded in the World Communication Summit in 2005 organised by the UNESCO and the ITU, the appropriateness of the word has been widely accepted, but the understanding of the contents of the word has never be commonly recognised. However, we all know the importance of knowledge based activities. What I want to emphasise here is, while the notion of knowledge management is studied quite well by the business world, this action scarcely happened in universities, which is the place for the production of knowledge. I look forward to universities developing such endeavour further.