

AN OVERVIEW OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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Abstract

Japan's universities and colleges have well supplied the demand for professionals in this highly industrialized country, home to the world's 3rd largest economy. Despite reverting to the Western-based education system after the World War II, the Japanese tertiary education system preserves its distinctiveness from other countries, even in the face of radical reforms to accommodate internationalization. This article describes the major reforms and structure of tertiary education in Japan, and examines the implications of some of its distinctive features.

Tertiary education in Japan is provided in universities, and vocational education in junior colleges, colleges of technology, special training schools and community colleges. This paper is mainly concerned with universities.

Tertiary education has been a major concern for the Japanese government after the Second World War. The concern remains to the present day and there have been alternating phases on displays of nationalist education (Cutts 1997) and internationalization (McVeigh 2002).

I. REFORMS

The first major reforms following the end of war included: egalitarian policies to eliminate elitism in Japanese universities, and grouping higher education institutions under the same “university” (or “junior colleges”) status replaced the hierarchical higher education system of “imperial” and “private” universities. Such changes successfully widened access to higher education for the Japanese people.

In the 1960's Japan underwent high economic growth and its higher education had to be tailored and diversified to serve the new needs, dividing

education and training of workforce into layers, from a few highly skilled professionals as managers to very large numbers of low-level support staffs. The Japanese government mainly focused qualitatively on education and research related to natural sciences and engineering, entrusting the private sector with the quantitative augmentation of tertiary education.

This somewhat uncontrolled higher education build-up had resulted in a decline in the quality of education, coupled with problems such as overcrowding, high tuition fees, insufficient facilities and libraries etc. In 1975, the Japanese government sought to exercise more control over private universities: it allotted public money to support their operational expenses, limited the student intake capacity and establishment of new private universities, and enacted a law that defined the “specialized training colleges” as institutions of higher education. There were 410 national, municipal and private universities in Japan that year. These series of changes, combined with other factors resulted in a 68% increase in the number of enrolled students and a 35% increase in the number of higher education institutions from the 70’s to the 80’s.¹

ENTRANCE EXAMINATION

The uniqueness of the Japanese entrance examination method has given rise to numerous debates coupled with booth praise and criticism. The method of student acceptance in Japanese universities differs from most of the rest of the world’s in that it does not rely on the Grade Point Average, and the candidates’ secondary education grades do not influence their university entrance examination score. For students who prefer national or public universities, acceptance relies on two basic entrance examinations: the national administered uniform achievement examination and the examination administered by the university of choice. In the case of private universities, the first type of examination is waived.

Entrance examination in Japanese university is popularly known as “examination hell”. This is in part because of the restriction that the government and large corporations set in hiring only graduates from the most prestigious universities, and in part because of the high importance

¹ Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

that the Japanese society places on academic credentials. As the private universities are less affordable, the competition at public and national universities is fierce and many students fail at the national uniform examination. They are called “ronin” (masterless samurai) and, instead of accepting admission in a private university, most of them wait and try again next year. In recent years the percentage of *ronins* at the national uniform examination was around 20%.²

STRUCTURE

With its 48% of the population (out of 127 million) having completed post-secondary education in its 989 universities and colleges, Japan is ranked 23rd in the world by tertiary education attainment, despite its being the 6th by the number of universities.³ Around 10% of the institutions of higher education in Japan are only for women.

An undergraduate university degree (bachelor’s degree) is typically awarded after 4 years of study, with the exception of medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and pharmacology that extend for 2 more years. The graduate university degrees combined take 5 years: 2 years for a Master’s and 3 years for a doctorate. In 2013, 689,692 students were enrolled in undergraduate courses, 73,353 in master courses and 15,557 in doctoral courses.

The admission fee in many national universities in Japan is 282,000 JPY (9,900 RON) and annual tuition fee 535,800 JPY (18,800 RON) per year. However, living expenses on average nationwide, including tuition, are estimated at 1,656,000 YEN (58,150 RON) per year. By contrast, for one of the most prestigious private universities in Japan, Waseda University, admission fee is 200,000 JPY (7,000 RON) and annual average tuition fee is 1,010,700 YEN (35,484 RON), excluding living expenses.

The quality of tertiary education in Japan is recognized internationally, with 33 universities in top 100 Asian universities and 5 universities in the QS World University Rankings top 100.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_education_in_Japan

³ Source: OECD. Stat Education and Training, Educational attainment of 25-64 year olds. OECD

GOVERNANCE

Tertiary education in Japan is vastly the domain of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), established in 1871. It is composed of a Minister's Secretariat, departments and 5 bureaus:

- Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau
- Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau
- Science and Technology Policy Bureau
- Research Promotion Bureau
- Research and Development Bureau

Universities are largely under the governance of the Higher Education Bureau (HEB). It grants permission for the establishment of new institutions of higher education and is responsible with education quality assurance. It is also responsible with administration for student selection, support, internationalization and exchange. Additionally, it provides support to private institutions of higher education through tax incentives, subsidies and operational guidance and advice.

The HEB is divided as follows:

- Higher Education Policy Planning Division
- University Promotion Division
- Technical Education Division
- Medical Education Division
- Student Support and Exchange Division
- National University Corporation Support Division

RECENT REFORMS

The major changes that have recently transformed the Japanese tertiary education institutions are mainly four: legal status and management system, periodic evaluation system, internationalization and resource allocation expansion.⁴

1. Independent corporation status

In 2004, all national universities that played important roles in the Japanese tertiary education received “independent corporation” status, situating them

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<https://www.nier.go.jp/English/educationjapan/pdf/201109HE.pdf#search=%27japanese+higher+education%27>

outside MEXT jurisdiction. As a way to achieve greater independence and autonomy, universities were allowed to manage themselves and take responsibility. Each university is lead by an elected president to a fixed 4 years term, with control over budgets, planning, employment and salaries. The managing board consists of a Board of Directors comprised of the president and trustees, and two councils: Management Council and Teaching and Research Council.

The universities are required to set targets for a period of 6 years and submit for approval to MEXT, for the granting of financial support (as operation grants). Progress evaluation is carried out annually by the Evaluation Committee of MEXT.

2. Certified Evaluation System

Until 2002, only national universities were required to submit self-evaluations to MEXT. Under the new “Certified Evaluation System”, all tertiary education institutions in Japan are evaluated every 7 years by evaluation bodies certified by MEXT. Presently there are 5 such bodies out of which only 1 is certified to evaluate all types of tertiary education institutions. All evaluations results are public.

3. Internationalization

Although the identity of the Japanese tertiary education is strong, substantial efforts have been invested in internationalization. Recently, the number of non-Japanese faculty employed in Japan has increased every year and so has that of the Japanese students going for study, exchange and internships overseas. As the English language is still not widely spoken in Japan, the destinations preferred by Japanese students are English speaking countries.

In 2008, the Japanese government set a 300,000 international students target by 2020. In 2009, there were 132,732 non-Japanese students studying in Japan, and by 2016 there were 239,287. That is a 55% increase in 7 years with positive expectations for the next 3 years to the achievement of the proposed goal. In 2016, 9,481 international students received scholarships from the Japanese government to study in Japan.⁵

⁵ http://www.jasso.go.jp/en/about/statistics/intl_student_e/2016/index.html

4. Expanding resource allocation

The Japanese government supports higher education institutions using public funds to allocate operational grants and capital development subsidies. Such subsidies account for 50-60% of the universities' fund revenues, the rest being secured through study fees, donations, private funds, administration of research funds obtained by faculty members and other incomes.

MEXT has changed the way funds are awarded from recurring to competitive basis and, with the increase of such funds, competition between institutes of higher education in Japan has increased too. The Grants-in-Aid for Academic Research (Kakenhi) is one set of such competitive funds intended to significantly develop all scientific research done in Japan. In 2014 the budget for Kakenhi was 227.6 billion YEN⁶ (7 billion RON).

CONCLUSION

Although some scholars would like to dispute this fact, the ties between a nation's economic growth and its higher education are increasingly visible, and even more so in the case of Japan. The reforms have mostly proved their efficiency and the goals set have fairly been achieved. Despite imperfections, Japan's dazzling ascent to the heights of global competitiveness in tertiary education is obvious and, as in many other respects, its performance is exemplary.

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⁶ <https://www.jsps.go.jp/english/e-grants/grants02.html>