

Universities need to strengthen educational role

Japan has made little progress in reforming its universities, despite much discourse on this being a pressing issue. Amid the decline in new enrollments, university administrators are focused entirely on how to enable their institutions to survive or how to secure the financial resources for university operations. That's understandable, but it's more important to transform universities into organizations capable of better contributing to society, the economy and people's livelihoods in Japan.

Are universities a place for education or research? This article will explore the importance of universities as educational institutions, rather than indulge in debate using such aesthetic language as "the pursuit of dual competence," which refers to the goal of academic staff possessing both educational and research capabilities.

When I was a university student, I was given valuable advice by the professors and intellectually stimulated by debate sessions with students in my year and above. Even so, I have little sense that I received an education. Probably as a result of this kind of feeling, it remains a deep-rooted opinion in the corporate world and in society that undergraduate universities and graduate schools don't educate students sufficiently. Therefore, businesses want to recruit them as early as possible and give them on-the-job training.

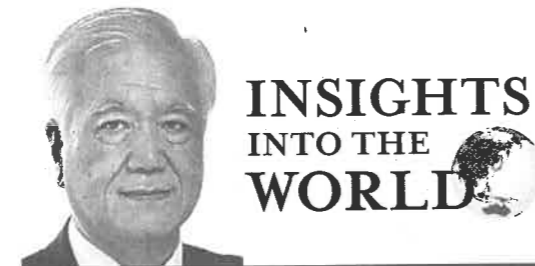
Even people who earn doctoral degrees after five years of studies, for example, are still unable to enjoy any benefit in terms of salary. No premium pay is offered in consideration of what they achieved through their doctoral studies.

This has resulted in a low percentage of people going on to graduate school in Japan. Those who complete only undergraduate studies often find it impossible to stand even on the starting line to be employed by global corporations headquartered abroad. The sparse pool of people who are skilled on a global level is threatening to lower Japan's status in the international community.

Universities should take seriously businesses and others' dissatisfaction with the content of the education they provide. Dissatisfaction with and distrust in university education are among the reasons that Japan's university enrollment rates have leveled off. Universities can be said to have failed to prove that they are more attractive than *senmon gakko* (professional training colleges) that devote themselves to giving students a vocational education.

There are a certain number of researchers who are known for cutting-edge, excellent research but are not skilled at teaching university students. In such cases, students' motivation to learn can only diminish.

One possible solution is to designate, through rigid selection procedures, a group of professors who are exceptionally proficient in communicating and explaining. Videos of their lectures would be recorded and students across the country could access the footage when they have time, including at night. Universities utilizing the recorded lectures could give their own lectures based on the footage, holding group discussions



INSIGHTS INTO THE WORLD

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or problem-solving practical training sessions. In this scenario, professors at the recipient universities would be expected to encourage, guide and deepen students' discussions.

Universities should do away with terraced lecture theaters that have hundreds of seats, where teachers speak unilaterally and students only listen. There have long been calls for revamping cram-style education focused on memorization, which is common up through the high school level. Universities shouldn't just repeat such methods.

Some students may say it would be too demanding to have to view recorded lectures on top of their ordinary daytime ones. But I want them to use such an opportunity proactively, as entering a university is not a goal but a new beginning.

Interdisciplinary fusion vital

Universities' academic disciplines are largely

classified into humanities and sciences, with their faculties subdivided further into a plethora of units. This academic landscape should be overhauled, too.

This detailed, specialized segmentation of academic areas that students have to pass through during a four-year undergraduate education was meaningful in postwar Japan. At the time, its public and private sectors had to make all-out efforts to rapidly foster certain specific industrial sectors designated as growth engines, to economically catch up with and overtake the West.

However, such segmentation has a drawback — it inhibits academic development. Likewise, it tends to make students narrow the range of intellectual interests in which they would otherwise have become well-versed.

We are now in an era in which Japan's economy and society have matured to a considerable extent, while changes in the world are gathering pace. The same old methods are unlikely to work. An academic discipline chosen by certain students at the time of their admission may be barely useful at the time of graduation.

Universities should discontinue the segmented faculty-by-faculty selection of entrants and, instead introduce a university-wide admission quota and enable freshman students enrolled under this quota system to choose academic fields in which they become interested in after enrollment.

Certain quarters may reject this idea, arguing that the absence of a preset admission quota for each faculty would make it difficult to formulate beforehand the teaching staff structure, particularly a well-balanced one. These misgivings can be resolved by creating a network of universities that are geographically close to one another or have academic specialties in common, and by making greater use of the credit transfer system.

A more flexible solution could work. Depending on the circumstances, students would change their residence every year or two to attend multiple universities during their undergraduate study. When they ultimately acquire the requisite number of credits at multiple universities, they will be awarded a degree. Considering the advancement of information technologies and the ubiquitous communications environment of today, students might not need to change residences at all.

There should be a system that allows students to earn dual degrees if they study hard enough.

I wonder whether setting a disciplinary 'boundary' between humanities and sciences makes sense in the first place.

When I attended Brown University in Rhode Island in the 1970s, the university required students to get a specific package of credits for each degree. Each student could opt for packages of his or her choice while taking fundamental courses. There were some exceptionally diligent students who managed to earn two bachelor's degrees, for example, one in mathematics and the other in cultural anthropology. Meaning they completed both science and humanities disciplines just over a four-year period.

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In recent years, a group of universities in Japan has been moving toward an amalgamation of the humanities and sciences, with a view to promoting "the cultivation of human resources across the humanities-science disciplinary boundary and through interdisciplinary fusion." But this approach is insufficient, as the universities have set that goal while also maintaining the disciplinary separation of humanities and sciences and the traditional formation of faculties and departments intact. They have to design a system that ensures flexibility for students and teachers to freely carry out interdisciplinary studies.

Hard reality

That said, we remain stuck with hard reality. For example, the trend in high school education to make light of mathematics — to put it

bluntly, math is being neglected.

One reason — or perhaps the main reason — for high school graduates to choose humanities at universities is that they are "bad at math." Each student's attitude toward math depends on the extent to which they are taught about it at school, but it's true that we're faced with an intolerable situation in which many high school graduates shun math, narrowing their future path. Math is always important, because it helps people acquire logical thinking abilities.

All universities should require applicants to sit for compulsory tests in Japanese language, mathematics and English language, with examinees given an option to choose two out of the three subjects of natural science, social science and humanities.

Universities should prepare an extra mandatory "training course" to help improve the academic ability of the test-takers who will achieve overall passing scores but not reach the minimum threshold scores in any of the three fundamental subjects.

I feel strongly, given my experience of briefly teaching at a Japanese university, that students should not neglect the development of writing skills. Some students compile reports in illegible Japanese and write puzzling sentences in English at best. Universities should not let such students graduate.

From the students' perspective, raising undergraduate and graduate education to a higher level means making it harder to graduate and the introduction of strict control by universities.

What should university students focus their time and energy on at "the place of learning" where they choose to spend a precious part of their lives at the age of around 20? Universities need to confidently offer an answer to this question.

Some people may ask why I'm talking about a matter that is out of my area of expertise. But I really hope that this article can help touch off a debate on how to improve university education.

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