

The Internationalization of Japan's Higher Education: Challenges and Evolutions

Naoyuki Agawa,
Keio University

The “*Kokusaika*”, or “*internationalization*” of Japan’s higher education is a frequent topic of conversation at Japanese universities these days. It is certainly a worthy cause to aspire to. However, in order precisely to understand what is driving this move at this particular point in time, one must first grasp the historical, cultural and geographical backgrounds of the move as well as a few salient aspects of education and research at Japanese universities today¹.

Historical Background

Japan’s higher education started in the 7th century as part of its first endeavor to globalize. In order to present itself as a civilized nation to the outside world and thus prevent subjugation by the rising Chinese dynasty of Tung, Japan embarked upon an effort to learn and adopt almost everything that Chinese civilization had to offer at the time. Higher education was one of them. A “*Daigaku*” or “*big school*”, modeled after a Chinese government educational institution of the time, was established to teach and train young Japanese bureaucrats. Hence, to this day, Japanese universities are called “*Daigaku*”. Monks from China, India, Vietnam and elsewhere were invited to Japan to teach the way of Buddha at major temples as well. Japan’s first study abroad program was also launched

during this period. For over two centuries, hundreds of young Japanese government officials and monks studied in China. Many of them perished on the way trying to cross the oceans on small, primitive boats.

A similar pattern was observed when Jesuit priests from Portugal and Spain landed on Japanese shores and started proselytizing to the Japanese in the 16th century. Seminaries were established in many regions where Jesuit priests taught the way of Christ along with European arts, science and technologies. A few adventurous Japanese Christians went all the way to Rome to have an audience with the Pope.

However, it was only after Commodore Perry arrived at the Yedo Bay with his squadron of black steamships in 1853 that Japan earnestly started establishing colleges and universities modeled after European and American higher education institutions. This again was part of the nation’s efforts to internationalize itself in a grand scale in the mid-to-late 19th century in order to survive the fierce competition with and among the Western colonial powers. For instance, the new Meiji government invited a few French jurists, including Judge Boissonade, to teach French civil and criminal codes to students at the newly established

Journée Japon
CampusFrance



1- Because “*internationalization*” is a loosely defined term, the term “*globalization*” will also be used throughout the remainder of this article.

Ministry of Justice¹. Many Japanese universities today, both national and private, date back to this period. They were typically founded by foreign missionaries or Japanese nationals who had studied abroad.

Among them was Fukuzawa Yukichi, who founded Japan's first modern private college, Keio Gijuku, in 1853. There he began to teach science and other subjects first in Dutch and then in English. He then took two trips to the United States and one to Europe, learned a great deal about western civilization, and founded a full-scale university of his own in 1890 by inviting three professors from Harvard University. The present writer now teaches there.

In all these cases, as well as during the post-WWII period of massive American influence, Japan earnestly embarked on the modernization of its higher education to meet global standards: it established new schools, invited foreign professors and sent young Japanese to study abroad. The people of each period felt that learning to handle foreign languages and mastering modern science, technology and art was a matter of their nation's survival in a changing international environment.

Curiously enough, however, their enthusiasm to globalize Japan's higher education system quickly waned each time they felt they had learned enough from abroad. They then reduced or discontinued their study abroad programs, sent home, or in some cases kicked out, foreign professors and engineers, and replaced them with Japanese professionals who had returned home from their training abroad. These professionals with new ideas and skills started teaching western technology and science in Japanese. This alleviated the need for the younger generation to master foreign languages in order simply to get started at universities.

During periods of indigenous development and maturity, universities remained relatively independent, or sometimes

even isolated, from the rest of the world. The country could afford it because of its geographic distance from other centers of the world resulting in little need actively to interact with other foreign nations on a daily basis. The homogeneous nature of Japan's people and the availability of jobs for professionals at home also provided little incentive for the country to further internationalize its higher education.

Japanese Universities That Are Very Japanese

Japanese universities today are the products of 150 (or at least 60) years of efforts to firmly establish and run a uniquely indigenous higher education system. After WWII, young Japanese again went to the United States in earnest in order to learn the new democratic way of America. The U.S. Occupation Forces tried vigorously to revamp and renovate Japan's education system as a whole. Nevertheless, Japanese universities somehow managed to keep intact their uniquely Japanese system of higher education that had been firmly established before the war. The only significant change in the postwar era was the massive increase in the number of both universities and their students². Other than that, Japanese universities continued to let their predominantly Japanese faculty members teach and research in Japanese on virtually all subject matters using text books written and printed in Japanese. They continued to do so with a predominantly Japanese student body. And universities have thrived in this environment, at least until recently.

One can easily see that the current structure of the Japanese higher education is not particularly suited to internationalization. In this system, one needs to be fluent in Japanese in order to pursue regular academic courses. Because Japanese is not a universal language of the world, the number of foreign students capable of doing so has always been limited. Courses in English

1- It is quite moving to read the notes these young students took in French from their French professors' lectures. These notes are preserved and on display at the old Ministry of Justice building in Tokyo.

2- Currently more than 50% of Japanese high school graduates continue on to university.

for those non-Japanese speaking foreign students who have a strong interest in Japan-related subject matters have been relatively few. Furthermore, Japan is a very safe, but not an inexpensive place to live and study in.

Thus, statistics show that the ratio of all students from abroad out of the total student body at Japanese universities is currently 3.8% as opposed to 33.4% in Australia, 27.0% in UK, 12% in both Germany and France, and 6.1% in the United States. Statistics also show that at some of the leading universities in the world, such as MIT, Oxford and Cambridge, foreign students account for close to 30% of the total student body. This number is roughly 20% for Harvard, 15% for Yale and 7% for UC Berkeley. The corresponding figure for leading Japanese universities is much lower. It is roughly 3% at Keio.

These leading universities of the world also employ many foreign professors and researchers, who account for 30% of the total faculty at UC Berkeley, Harvard, and Yale, and 40% at Cambridge and Oxford. The Japanese average is 5%. In comparison, the average for China is 1% and the average for South Korea is 2%. It is clear that most East Asian countries, including Japan, are handicapped compared to universities where courses are regularly taught in English.

One notes, however, that leading universities in some Asian countries are rapidly increasing the number of foreign students they accept. Similarly, the number of Asian students studying abroad, particularly those from China, Korea and India, is also increasing at a very rapid pace. In this regard, the days where increasing numbers of Japanese students studied at leading universities in the United States and Europe are now over. The number of Japanese students studying at foreign universities peaked in 2004, but then began to drop and continues to decline to this day. Hence the criticism that Japanese university

students are becoming passive and introverted. In contrast, students from Japan's neighboring countries, such as China and Korea, are becoming predominant at universities in the U.S. and in Europe. That is a serious cause of concern for the country.

Renewed Vigor to Internationalize Higher Education in Japan, Really?

Japan does not need to globalize as long as it can live happily in isolation. The Japan that closed its doors to the West in the 1630's felt no need to reopen the country for more than 200 years, because it was self-sufficient, had no wars or invasions, and its people, particularly those in the cities, had a relatively decent standard of living for the time with thriving arts to enjoy. That splendor in isolation was completely shattered once the black steamships arrived.

Many in Japan believe Japan is at a similar juncture now and that again Japan needs earnestly to internationalize in order to survive in today's complex and competitive world. Signs are on the wall. Japan's economy is not growing. Its industrial bases are being eroded. Its population is shrinking. It is rapidly aging. Its neighbors are now highly industrialized and competitive. Young people in China, Korea and India are motivated, well-educated and increasingly more globally-oriented. On top of all this, Japan was hit hard by the triple disaster of a devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident.

In view of all these adverse factors, most everybody agrees that the last best hope for the country's future is its young people. Japan needs to nurture a new generation of citizens who can compete in the more globalized and competitive world. If so, the responsibility for this nurturing primarily lies with Japan's universities. Are Japanese higher education institutions ready for this challenge?

There is good news and bad news. Let us start with the bad news, or not so good news. To begin with, there are still a lot of disincentives for universities and their students to globalize. After all, Japanese universities are so fundamentally Japan-oriented so it is difficult to quickly transform their way of business to meet the global standard. Indeed, the society is not structured to produce globally oriented professionals. For instance, Japan's bar examination, civil servant (first class) examination, and national medical examination of Japan, the three most prestigious examinations that are extremely hard to pass, have no English proficiency component. Thus studying English is effectively against one's self interest if one wants to become an elite foreign-service officer by passing the civil servant exam.

Japan's economic slump does not help efforts to globalize the country's higher education. As in Europe and the United States, government budgets are being cut across the board, including funds for education and research. Corporate and private donations are down. Universities have less money to spare for innovative international programs. Students are nervous about the prospect of fewer job opportunities after graduation and are thus reluctant to study abroad lest they miss opportunities for job interviews while away.

More fundamentally, and somewhat ironically, despite many uncertainties about their country's future, students seem complacent about staying in Japan. They may not be able to achieve great wealth or success if they remain in Japan, but they can still get jobs and earn a living in Japan. They can eat Japanese food. They do not have to speak in English or any other foreign language. It is safe to stay home. It is comfortable staying home. Why bother to go abroad? That may be a rational choice.

Meanwhile, the recent devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear

accident scared off some foreign students who would have otherwise come to Japan to study. As a result, the number of foreign students studying at Japanese universities is down at least for the short term. That is a disappointment and it will slow efforts to make Japanese university campuses more internationally diverse.

There is, nevertheless, some good news as well. First of all, Japanese universities are certainly listening and trying. The government is distributing grants specifically to promote the globalization of higher education, helping Japanese universities rapidly to establish or expand international programs. This is despite the general budgetary crunch on the part of both government and the universities. Some of these programs are designed to receive and educate a greater number of foreign students on their campuses. For instance, perhaps for the first time in the history of Japan's higher education, a few universities have begun to offer undergraduate courses that are taught in English specifically for non-Japanese speaking foreign students.

Other programs have been established or expanded to send more students to foreign universities. The number of international exchange programs with leading foreign universities is increasing. There are new double-degree and joint-degree programs particularly with European universities. An increasing number of short programs and summer programs are becoming available for those students who cannot afford to spend a year or a semester abroad financially or otherwise but who nevertheless want to study overseas. Japanese universities, sometimes with government funds, often provide subsidies to assist students who want to study abroad.

Most importantly, a substantial portion of the university student body are (and always have been) physically and mentally dynamic as well as intellectually curious and will happily study abroad



if and when an occasion arises. In fact, compared to the students 30 or 40 years ago, many of today's university students are much more open, less inhibited, and quite comfortable in interacting with foreign students. Many of them have lived abroad. Many speak English or another language. Those are the students who instantly make friends with exchange students from France, Korea or China. And between and among these students, there seem to be few barriers caused by differences in language or culture. Those are the young people in both Japan and elsewhere who in the future work together, argue with each other, and remain friends for years to come. Hopefully they will make the world a slightly better and a safer place.

Japan Is Not an Island

With all its historical and geographical backgrounds, it is unrealistic to expect the whole nation of Japan to be a multi-lingual, ethnically diverse society. After all, Japan is not Singapore. Accordingly, it is not the job of Japanese universities to teach everyone in English. On the other hand, it is highly desirable and urgently necessary that a much greater number of Japanese nationals play more significant and constructive roles in the international arena, in government, business, academia, art, and other fields. Here, universities have a role to play: they can provide students with opportunities to study abroad. The universities only need to push them gently forward and let them expand their horizons. The students will take it from there.

Likewise, Japan still has a lot to offer to foreign students. Japan has experiences and know-how in dealing with some serious global issues, such as aging and a shrinking population, welfare and health care reform, energy conservation, environmental protection, and nuclear safety. Here, too, Japanese universities with expertise in these fields can offer much to young foreign students and researchers. It is not only “anime” and

other forms of pop culture that they can study in Japan.

In both ways, universities will be able to contribute to make Japan a more open, diverse, globally oriented and more productive nation. Japan needs these efforts in order to remain a productive and reliable member of the international community.

An English poet, John Donne, stated in his famous poem: “*No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main*”. Japan is an island and proud to be so. But in the sense of John Donne's poem, Japan is not an island. No Japanese university or student is, nor should be, an island either. Perhaps that is what we need to instill in the hearts and minds of young and aspiring students. As John Donne also aptly put, we are all involved in mankind.



◆ Biographical Sketch

Naoyuki Agawa



Naoyuki Agawa graduated from the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., *magna cum laude*, in 1977 after he transferred to Georgetown from Keio University in 1975. Upon graduation, he joined Sony Corporation in Tokyo, Japan, and there worked on international trade and copyright law matters.

He read law at and graduated from the Georgetown University Law Center in 1984. He joined the law firm of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher in 1987 and worked for its Washington, D.C. and Tokyo offices through 1995. He is licensed to practice law in the state of New York and Washington, D.C.

Continuing to practice law with the law firm of Nishimura & Partners in Tokyo, Mr. Agawa joined Keio University as professor at its Shonan

Fujisawa campus (SFC) in 1999 teaching American constitutional law and history. He was appointed Minister for Public Affairs at the Embassy of Japan in Washington, D.C. in August 2002 and served in that capacity until he returned to Keio in April 2005. He was elected and served as Dean of the Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, between July 2007 and June 2009. He assumed the position of Vice-President of Keio in July 2009. In that position, he is in charge of Keio's international affairs, SFC and Keio High School in New York.

Mr. Agawa has also taught Japanese and U.S. Constitution at the University of Virginia School of Law, Georgetown University Law Center, Elon University School of Law, Doshisha University, and Tokyo University.

Mr. Agawa's publications include, among others, *The Birth of an American Lawyer, To America with de Tocqueville, The Friendship on the Seas: the United States Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Have You Found America?, American History through the United States Constitution, 2520 Massachusetts Avenue.*

Mr. Agawa received the Yomiuri-Yoshino Sakuzo Award for his book, *American History through the United States Constitution*, in 2005. He is a frequent contributor to such newspapers as *Sankei*, *Yomiuri* and *Mainichi*, and journals, both academic and general, including *Chuo Koron*, and *Bungei Shunju*. He has also given lectures and speeches at various institutions and universities including Yale University, Harvard University, Kyoto University, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the Ministry of Defense of Japan, Mitsubishi Corporation.

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Claude Torrecilla

claude.torrecilla@campusfrance.org

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