Higher Education Report: Japan

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Abstract

1.With the rise of globalization and the declining birthrate and aging population in Japan, great changes leading to the realization of Society 5.0 are expected in Japan's industrial and social structures. These underlying transitions and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are creating the momentum for rethinking the course of higher education in Japan.

2.Issues that are expected to be addressed as measures for the development and realization of Japan's international strategy for higher education in anticipation of the post-COVID world include: 1) promotion of distance and online education, 2) assurance of quality in education, 3) diversification of learning, 4) responses to digitalization, 5) enhancement of student support, 6) preparation of facilities, 7) education responsive to globalization, 8) attracting international students, and 9) diversification of the academic calendar and periods of study.

Presentation

3. This report summarizes the current situation of higher education in Japan and issues and future directions for higher education in the post-COVID era, described in the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council's 12th Proposal titled "New Ways for Learning in the Post-COVID Era" submitted on June 3, 2021, and the Central Council for Education's Report titled "Grand Design for Higher Education toward 2040" submitted on November 26, 2018.

Current situation of higher education

4.With the immense changes in Japan's industrial and social structures as it heads toward the realization of Society 5.0, in addition to advancing globalization and the declining birthrate and aging population in Japan, Japan will have to make important reforms and changes aiming at the achieving of a sustainable and vibrant society. For that, universities and other institutions of higher education will be required to recognize

that they bear an important responsibility for soundly responding to the issues that Japan and its citizens face and to proactively execute reforms that meet these expectations from citizens and society.

5.Moreover, the spread of the COVID pandemic seriously impacted institutions of higher education, including universities, in Japan, forcing them to suspend or curtail in-person classes, [1] suspend international exchange projects, and so on. All institutions of higher education have been making extensive efforts to provide high-quality learning opportunities to their students, beginning with the introduction of remote and online classes. The COVID pandemic has become an impetus for rethinking the course of higher education, and with the prospects of facing an unpredictable future, the role that higher education must play in nurturing individuals who can think independently and take responsible action is becoming increasingly important.

6.In addition, during the COVID pandemic, universities overseas have been providing high-quality educational programs utilizing distance, online education that attract excellent foreign students. Japan as well will need to develop new paradigms for higher education that are at the forefront of international education.

Current challenges in higher education

Issue 1: Higher education in the new normal
7.Because of the COVID pandemic, many institutions of higher education introduced and conducted remote, online classes (as of May 2020, 90% of universities, junior colleges, and colleges of technology were fully conducting online classes). In a subsequent survey, while almost all universities intended to conduct in-person classes, around 80% of the universities responded that they were planning to conduct both in-person and online classes.

8.The merits of online education are that it makes learning easier since students can learn at their own pace, and leads to more ingenuity and qualitative improvements in the conducting of classes, such as by the introduction of "flipped classes," and enriches learning by enabling students to take courses at other domestic or overseas universities. Remote education also provides opportunities to students who face difficulties commuting to classes to continue their education, and ensures opportunities for students to engage in cross-cultural exchanges and gain international experience, without needing to travel overseas, and for international, multilateral exchanges.

9.On the other hand, the demerits of online education are that it can adversely affect students' health by increasing the amount of class time for viewing materials with ICT

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[1] Classes held in a face-to-face format in a classroom.

devices and that remote learning tends to isolate students by not providing sufficient opportunities for exchanges with other students and teachers. It also makes it more difficult for the sight and hearing impaired to gain the merits of online education. Measures also have to be taken to deal with the time differences that arise with intercultural and international exchanges.

10.Moreover, it will be necessary for learners to be able to learn independently and at their own volition, and to grow. Also important will be promoting the diversification of learning and enhancing opportunities for more people to gain opportunities for receiving higher education. With increasing socioeconomic uncertainty, the mission that higher education must play is to become a driving force for social change through the enhancement and upgrading of educational and research activities, to open up new opportunities and territories for humankind, to present proactive and creative solutions to problems, and to foster the human resources that can accomplish this mission. To meet the challenges higher education will face in the "new normal"[2] ensuing from the experiences of the COVID pandemic as it seeks to realize the kind of education outlined above, institutions of higher education must develop and take initiatives to deal with the following issues.

1) Promotion of remote, online education

11.The establishment of hybrid education that effectively combines in-person and online education and the shift to data-driven education through the digitalization of education are expected to lead to initiatives for enhancing the quality of independent learning.

12.Also essential will be the sharing among universities and faculty of knowledge and resources related to online education, the enhancing of the quality of online learning through greater collaboration with businesses, and the active and wide transmission of resources for online education.

13.Moreover, as institutions of higher education head toward new modalities of learning after COVID, it will be essential to study and assess remote, online education from the perspectives of learners' needs and quality assurance, to consider making the acquiring of credits in online courses more flexible, and to consider revamping quality assurance systems, such as the standards for establishing universities, the system for approving the establishment of universities, and the certification evaluation system.

2) Quality assurance through education reforms

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[2] Since the enormous impact of the COVID pandemic has been extensive and long-term, the post-COVID world in which the spread of COVID has been curtailed will, it is strongly believed, shift to a so-called "new normal" world.

14.A problem that university education in Japan is seen to be facing is that ensuring that students have acquired the necessary skills and capabilities by the time they graduate — "exit quality assurance" — is not sufficiently carried out.

15.Hence, universities are being tasked to make improvements in this regard by integrating courses, sharply reducing the number of courses that large numbers of students take at the same time, and so on. In addition, the greater utilization of administrative data for research purposes, such as building databases that track the same cohort of students over a long period of time, collating administrative data[3] and university business data and making it available for research, etc., is desirable.

3) Double-tracking and diversification of education

16.Under the practice of entering university at 18 and the bulk recruitment of new graduates, in the Japanese educational system there has been no development of learning that goes beyond school type, such as between high schools and universities. Moreover, both universities and companies have not sufficiently opened up the possibilities for recurrent education targeting working adults.

17.It will be necessary for institutions of higher education to be able to enhance the facilitation of collaboration and articulation between high school and university education by making use of the special features of online education, enrich and advance recurrent education, promote the flexible operation of periods of study, and provide opportunities to a diverse range of learners, including those who have difficulty taking advantage of learning opportunities such as working adults, seniors, and the handicapped, to receive high-quality higher education.

4) Responding to digitalization (digitalization of administrative and educational duties, fostering of human resources leading digitalization)

18.With the rapid digitalization of all aspects of society, it will important for higher education as well to conduct remote, online education, introduce and operate learning management systems (LMS), and promote data-driven education through the collection, analysis, and utilization of data.

19.In particular, efforts for the digitalization of academic records and certification are making progress under international networks, and such efforts are already becoming international standards. Since this digitalization contributes to the internationalization of universities by increasing the international reliability of academic records certification and facilitating the dispatch and acceptance of international students, Japanese universities must also promptly pursue measures for digitalization.

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[3] Data that are collected by the national or local governments for administrative purposes; the data are not limited to only data collected through surveys but also data gathered as part of normal administrative duties.

20. Moreover, universities must also enhance and boost education related to mathematics, data science, and AI, as well as upgrade the fostering of human resources who will become leaders in the digital age.

5) Enhancing support to students

21. Further boosting support measures for students is also necessary so that students wishing to proceed to an institution of higher education will not have to abandon their hopes due to the financial impact caused by the COVID pandemic.

22. The national government has taken various support measures for students during the COVID pandemic, including support as needed to students from households experiencing sudden changes in their financial situation, the provision of emergency cash payments and interest-free scholarship loans, and measures to reduce the burden of student scholarship loan repayments.

23. In addition, the further strengthening of employment support measures for students, including new graduates, facing a worsening employment and financial situation is necessary.

6) Preparation of facilities, equipment

24. The planned preparation and maintenance of attractive facilities and equipment for university campuses is also necessary.

25. Universities are also being called upon to play a leading role in the building of a sustainable society, and they are expected to advance initiatives for making a carbon neutral society by making smart campuses, curtailing the consumption of energy, and so on.

Issue 2: A new international strategy for higher education from a global perspective

26. The worldwide COVID pandemic has shaken the international political, economic, and social order by making cooperation on a global level a mere shell of its former self, and furthering concerns of international divisions. It is essential for Japan to aim at further gaining the trust and respect of the international community and becoming an indispensable country for global society. For that, Japanese institutions of higher education are required to play an important role by fostering global leaders, promoting international collaboration and cooperation in research and education, and so on.

27. The COVID pandemic has had a serious impact on university and student exchanges, international joint research, and other areas in not only Japan but around the world, and initiatives are being seen in many countries to expand support for international exchanges through distance, online education.

28.Japanese universities are being required to respond strategically to of course the COVID pandemic but also in anticipation of the post-COVID era.

1) Realization of educational environments that can respond to globalization, fostering students' global responsiveness

29.Thoroughly promoting the internationalization of educational contents and environments, fostering global leaders who can play active roles on the world stage, and developing human resources who can lead the revitalization of regional societies with a global perspective are important for the strategic promotion of internationalization by universities based on the diversity of students and features and policies of universities and the special characteristics of education and research fields.

30.With the great restrictions on international collaboration and exchange activities due to COVID, it is particularly important to actively promote initiatives taking advantage of the merits of remote, online education, such as the development and implementation of the COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) program,[4] which is predicated on the global advance of online education.

31.Moreover, the building of platforms for universities to be able to share online educational resources with other domestic and overseas universities they have ties with, and actively disseminating internationally the strengths and attractiveness of Japanese education are also needed. Together with this, supporting study abroad programs, including promoting the study abroad experience from the high school level, from the perspective of fostering and strengthening Japanese students' global responsiveness in conjunction with the further promotion of joint degree programs (JD: system for international collaboration in curriculum) is essential.

2) Strategic acceptance of excellent international students

32.In 2019 over 310,000 international students were enrolled in institutions of higher education and Japanese language institutes, but in order to strengthen Japan's international competitiveness for attracting and accepting international students and to gain the further trust of the international community, it has become necessary to focus on the outcomes of international students' study in Japan, while also paying careful attention to preventing the outflow of technology from Japan, and to shift to an emphasis on ensuring and improving the quality of international students.

33.For this, promoting the employment in Japan of international students after they graduate in order to encourage their remaining and being active in Japan and making efforts to strengthen networks with international students after they return to their countries are important. Also necessary is realizing high-quality international mobility

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[4] COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) is an international two-way educational method that utilizes online learning.

in both the accepting and sending of students, including encouraging Japanese students to study overseas.

34. Moreover, also effective will be the promotion of the globalization of university admissions by utilizing the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as well as the development of new types of hybrid study abroad programs that will lead to international students' full involvement in such programs since they will be able to receive higher education in Japan by also receiving distance, online courses from abroad through the COIL programs.

3) Diversifying and making more flexible the academic calendar and periods of study, contact with society

35. It is believed that the introduction of a fall university admissions system will be an effective measure for promoting the internationalization of Japanese universities and improving their educational and research capabilities by facilitating exchanges with countries that have the same beginning and end of the academic calendar, increasing the number of international students and researchers dispatched from those countries and accepted at Japanese universities, encouraging the establishment of joint degree programs, and so on.

36. At the same time, diversifying and making more flexible the periods for admissions and graduation without limiting them only to the fall should increase and diversify the employment options for students, including international employment.

37. From the perspective of enabling students to discover universities where various methods of learning are available to them that suit their abilities and aptitudes and the career path they wish to follow, diversifying and making more flexible the admissions and graduation periods through the introduction of autumn admissions, a four-term academic year, etc. will be important.

Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future

38. The responses to the issues outlined above and the realization of their contents are expected to promote higher education towards 2030 and beyond.

39. The Central Council for Education's "Grand Design for Higher Education toward 2040" report submitted to MEXT on November 26, 2018 raises five goals leading societal change around the year 2040: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Society 5.0/4th industrial revolution, the 100-year-life era, globalization, and regional revitalization. In addition, it offers three directions that should be taken as guidelines for higher education reform.

1. Based on a diverse mission, higher education institutions are asked to clarify "what learners can learn and acquire" and allow them to realize the results of

learning. Accordingly, a diverse and flexible education and research system is prepared for each higher education institution along with a matching quality assurance approach, to verify how such education is conducted.

2. Based on current estimates that the 18-year-old population will have decreased to 880,000 in 2040 or about 70% of the current comparable population, each institution is striving to accept more grown-ups and international students after optimizing its size from the perspective of maintaining and improving education.

3. To consider the size of higher education in the area, there is always scope for discussion on a grand scale for regional higher education. And, higher education in each area is enriched from the perspective of responding to regional needs and relevant higher education institutions link up and integrate with each other to optimally exploit their respective strengths and features.

40. Necessary policies to be steadily carried out, in hope that the higher education reforms by all stakeholders including learners will have come to fruition by 2040 and Japan will evolve into a country where new value is created through fully demonstrated functions of education and research.

References

"New Ways for Learning in the Post-COVID Era," 12th Proposal submitted by the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council, June 3, 2021.

"Grand Design for Higher Education toward 2040" report submitted by the Central Council for Education, November 26, 2018.