

# Reforming Japanese Higher Education: Bureaucrats, the Birthrate, and Visions of the 21st Century

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It is difficult to generalize about the Japanese university system, because it is so large. There are currently 649 universities with 2.7 million students, including 99 national universities, run by the central government, and 66 'public' universities, run by prefectural or city governments. The rest are private universities, ranging from the internationally prestigious Waseda and Keio universities at the top to local institutions struggling to attract sufficient students to keep going at the bottom. There are also over 500 junior colleges (*tanki daigaku*), with a further 328,000 students, offering two-year courses, mainly for women as described by McVeigh (1997).<sup>1</sup> And yet generalizations about the system as a whole are often made, by foreign and Japanese commentators alike, and for the last few years, these have generally been negative. As Goodman notes earlier in this issue, higher education, both in Japan and in other countries of the region, has recently been attracting a bad press.

The best-known attacks on the Japanese system are probably Ivan Hall's *Cartels of the Mind* (1998), part of which deals with the treatment of foreign professors in Tsukuba University, and Robert Cutts' *An Empire of Schools* (1997), which sees Tokyo University as the heart of darkness in Japanese society. In a more scholarly vein, Brian McVeigh has argued that the Japanese educational system tends to represent and support the interests of Japan's statist and nationalist elites (McVeigh 1998, 2000). In McVeigh's view, meaningful reforms in education have only taken place in two periods of Japan's modern history: after the Meiji Restoration, and during the American Occupation. But critiques of the system are not confined to English language publications: there are books in Japanese which are as vitriolic as anything which the Japan-bashing tendency abroad has been able to offer (e.g. Nakaoka 1999).

Calls and agendas for reform also go back a long way. In addition to the sources listed by Goodman, the work of the American Leonard Schoppa (1991) provides a useful benchmark. Schoppa described educational reform as an example of 'immobilist' politics. Much of his book was concerned with the school system, but it also touched on higher education, if only because he traced many of the ills of the education system to the pressure created by the requirements of the university entrance examinations. In this paper, therefore, I discuss the reform agenda in the 1980s as described by Schoppa, and consider some of the most significant directions of change during the 1990s. I then

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on the Ministry's own estimates for 2001. I am grateful to Roger Goodman for supplying me with them.

outline the recent thinking of the Monbukagakushô, the Japanese Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology<sup>2</sup> on the need for further reform and the direction which it should take. As will be seen, many of the issues which Schoppa outlined a decade ago are still current, but there is a new urgency in the debate as the country faces continued economic stagnation and a rapidly aging society. Finally I consider whether these reforms are any more likely to be successful than their predecessors, or whether the kinds of obstacles described by Schoppa, McVeigh, and the others will still prevail.

### **University Reforms: From the 1960s to the 1980s**

The Japanese government launched a number of initiatives relating to higher education reform during the post-war period, but it is generally agreed that these achieved little. In 1967, the education minister, Kennoki Toshihiro, issued a formal request for advice from the Ministry's Central Council on Education on the development of an 'integrated educational system suited for contemporary society' (Schoppa 1991: 172). The main issues were the responsiveness of the education system to the country's social needs, and how it was to be financed. In relation to higher education, one of the main issues was the reform of the undergraduate curriculum. The Americans during the Occupation had set up four-year degree programmes, including two years of 'general education' as the standard. There was a general feeling that this should be changed, but no agreement about what should replace it. Various proposals were put forward, including the creation of graduate universities offering elite courses, though these were slow to materialise. Other proposals called for greater openness and rationality in university administration, though these, too, came to nothing (Schoppa 1991: 182-84). The major measure that was implemented (in 1970) was the provision of increased aid to private universities. Since the war, the government had generally left private universities to find their own funds for expansion, and one of the factors underlying the student protests of the late 1960s was overcrowding in the private sector (Schoppa 1991: 193). The implementation of this measure was due to an unusual degree of agreement between the Ministry, LDP politicians, and the universities themselves. Other ideas led to more sustained opposition, such as the attempt to stratify universities into classes, a plan seen as an attack on their freedom. The old Tokyo Education University was transformed into the new Tsukuba University, with a streamlined executive and an outside advisory board, in an attempt to create a more rational and open institution, but Tsukuba's example was not copied by other universities (Schoppa 1991: 195-98).

All remained faculty-dominated, centrally-weak institutions without advisory boards for input from outside the universities. Furthermore, while many had been considering their own administrative reform plans in the early 1970s, most abandoned their efforts before implementing significant changes. (Schoppa 1991: 198)

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<sup>2</sup> Formerly the Ministry was known by the shorter name of Monbushô, usually translated in English simply as 'Ministry of Education', which I use in this paper as a shorthand form for convenience. Its current full name is now abbreviated in its English publications as 'MEXT'.

A final reform dating from the late 1970s was the introduction of a new unified first-stage university entrance examination, the *kyōtsūichiji*. Even though this provided high school students with a uniform system of grading, the requirement that all students should be examined in seven subjects ran against government efforts at curriculum reform and greater flexibility in high schools. Nearly all the students' time was taken up with subjects on which they were to be examined.

The reform of education, including the universities, was put back on the agenda again with the appointment of Nakasone Yasuhiro as prime minister in 1982. The following year, amidst worries about growing juvenile delinquency, Nakasone put forward a seven-point reform program of the entire education system, including reform of the *kyōtsūichiji*, and promotion of the internationalization (*kokusaika*) of education (Schoppa 1991: 214-15). An Ad Hoc Council on Education was set up in 1984, but its work was compromised from the start by the underlying tension between the government, which wanted reform without additional expenditure, and the Ministry which wanted extra resources without reform. Many educators disagreed with the nationalist nature of the Nakasone program. Most of the issues raised during the reform process of the 1970s were raised yet again, including stronger central administration, greater openness, reform of the general studies programmes, the conversion of state universities to autonomous institutions (*hōjinka*), and the conversion of faculty tenure to a contract system. However, once again not much happened. A University Council was set up to advise the Ministry and take over the work of the Ad Hoc Council, but its membership consisted of a mixture of progressives and conservatives likely to balance each other out (Schoppa 1991: 238-39, 245).

What all this points to is the way in which criticisms of the education system had coalesced into various distinct schools of thought. First, there were the conservatives, represented by politicians such as Nakasone and the Japanese employers' association, Nikkeiren, who saw the main problem as the rise of indiscipline and the decline of the work ethic. Second, there were the liberals, including the main teachers' union, Nikkyōsō (cf. Aspinall 2001), who saw the main problem as lack of flexibility and excessive competition in examinations. Third, there were those who saw the main problem as excessive regulation of the system by the Education Ministry itself. For the Ministry, the first priorities were the elimination of uniformity and restrictions in the system. There were other viewpoints as well – such as a common view within the Education Ministry that the system had served the nation well and that reform was therefore not necessary.

In any case, the political horse-trading and balance of forces within the debate meant that in the end the proposals for reform produced few results. The new entrance exam system was unpopular and hampered attempts to reform the high school curriculum. The government's proposals paid lip service to internationalization and laid more stress on the importance of using English and other foreign languages as a means of communication, but this did little for English teaching in the short term, given that many of the English teachers both in schools and universities were themselves very poor at speaking it. As McConnell's study of the early history of the JET program for recruiting foreign language teachers in the 1980s makes clear, this was one of the main reasons why many Japanese teachers initially resisted the program (McConnell 2000: 190).

## The Men from the Ministry

As Goodman suggests, many of the changes in higher education in the 1990s in Japan were linked both to the long 'Heisei recession' which began with the collapse of the 'bubble economy' in 1991 (Wood 1993), and to the continuing fall in the birthrate, currently one of the lowest in the world. During the bubble economy period, various grandiose projects had been planned by both national and local governments, including several new prefectural and city universities which eventually came on stream in the 1990s. At the same time, many of the two-year junior colleges, both public and private, were being transformed into universities with four-year degree programmes, or absorbed into other institutions, in line with market demand. Elsewhere some of the more successful private universities established satellite campuses and new programmes, often outside the major cities where land was cheaper. Because of the problems of the recession and the birthrate, however, the Ministry of Education began to limit the number of new initiatives. The fall in the birthrate was for a time offset by the rising levels of participation in university education, but by 2000 this had also peaked. Many private institutions were already facing a situation in which the number of applicants was falling below the number of places, and it seemed likely that there was worse to come

In conversations about universities in Japan, the discussion usually turns at some point to the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science which is often seen as responsible for the ills of the system as a whole. In addition to accusations by McVeigh (1998: chapter 6; 2000) and others of conservatism and nationalism, the Ministry is also regarded by many as highly intrusive in its day-to-day dealings with the universities, both public and private.

As an example, the Ministry approves all new universities, faculties and courses, and monitors their progress during the first years of operation. This scrutiny normally lasts until the first students graduate, i.e. four years in the case of a new undergraduate program or two years in the case of a master's program. What this monitoring actually consists of is an interesting question. From my own experience, it certainly does not extend to day-to-day teaching, as in teaching assessments in the UK, or even to the content of classes. The easiest thing for the Ministry to monitor is personnel: at the outset of a new program, it approves a list of teaching staff assigned to particular courses, and any later changes to this plan also have to be submitted to the Ministry for approval. The paperwork involved is enormous: in the case of APU, the documentation collected consisted of summaries of the publications of all potential staff members over the previous ten years. The Ministry controls both who can be appointed and the level at which particular teachers can be appointed (lecturer, associate professor or full professor), depending on their qualifications and publications.

The influence of the Ministry is felt in numerous other ways as well. Through its various programmes, the Ministry is the largest source of research funding in Japanese universities, and the complexity and inflexibility of the rules concerning how these funds can be spent are legendary. In national universities, regulations governing the purchase and use of the equipment by university staff with their annual *kenkyūhi* (research allowance) are equally complex, and this equipment has to be left behind

when staff members retire, even if it is obsolescent and of little use to anybody else. It cannot be purchased second-hand by the retiring staff members, and so it tends to accumulate in cupboards or corridors, gathering dust and rust, until it is eventually thrown out.

In addition to the written rules and regulations, Ministry instructions are also communicated to universities in the form of 'administrative guidance', and this is remembered by local bureaucrats long after the factors which gave rise to it have disappeared. The result is that current Ministry thinking and local officials' perceptions of current Ministry thinking may be quite different, with local officials tending to err on the side of caution. In the late 1990s, Shiga University was still requiring staff who had traveled abroad to submit copies of the relevant pages of their passports as evidence of their travels, on the grounds that this was required by the Ministry. The practice had been abolished at the University of Tokyo, another national university, seven years previously. Another example was the belief in the Shiga personnel office that foreign lecturers had to be less than 40 years old at the time of their appointment. This seems to have been based on a notorious verbal directive from the Ministry several years before, which some universities interpreted as an instruction to pasture some of their older foreign lecturers, thus precipitating a row between the American embassy and the Japanese government (Hall 1995: chapter 3). Shiga bureaucrats continued to believe for another five years that only younger lecturers could be appointed, until an enterprising staff member checked with the Ministry directly, and found that there was no longer any such restriction.

Numerous colorful anecdotes of red tape at the grass roots should not, however, disguise the fact that there were many changes for the better in Japanese state universities in the 1990s, including considerable improvements in basic teaching and research facilities. When I first arrived at the University of Tokyo in 1991, I was surprised to find that the computing facilities on the Komaba campus were extremely poor compared with the system I had been used to in the UK, despite the fact that the campus was part of the most prestigious university in the country. Computers of various kinds did exist, but they had not been properly networked, and there seemed to be nobody with specific responsibility for their operation and maintenance. I could receive email from the UK, but could not send it, and nobody could tell me why. After a few months the entire system was removed, and the question became purely academic. It was not replaced until shortly before I left Tokyo in 1994, and moved to Shiga where suddenly the campus was awash with boxes of new hardware. Between 1993 and 1995 the Ministry injected an enormous amount of cash into the national university IT system, and by 1996 the facilities were as good as those I had been used to in the UK. There was also a quiet revolution in library cataloging: the NACSIS Webcat system now provides access to information on the holdings of all major institutions in higher education, including both books in Japanese and foreign languages. The information which it gives is much more detailed than that provided by its British equivalent, COPAC, allowing interlibrary loans to be processed extremely quickly.

### **Teaching and Examining**

Other targets of criticism of the Japanese university system include the professors, the curriculum, teaching, and the examination system. From my own experience, I would

agree that professors teaching in Japan are subject to few of the constraints or quality control mechanisms that have developed in the UK over the last few years, which actually makes day-today life considerably more comfortable than the situation described by Palfreyman earlier in this issue. There are no external examiners, nor even departmental examination meetings, so professors are generally free to design, examine, and grade their courses in any way they like, or simply just pass all the students without any formal grading procedures at all. However student evaluation of courses is starting to become common, particularly in the newer institutions, and this is a trend supported by the Ministry. As Lee-Cunin's research shows (1999), Japanese students, contrary to popular opinion, do hold strong views about their teachers and their courses, but their voices are seldom heard in a literature which tends to concentrate on the teachers and the bureaucracy.

I have written about the career and publishing strategies of Japanese professors elsewhere (Eades 2000): it can probably be said that in both of these areas Japanese professors find life easier than do their counterparts in the USA or UK. In Japanese universities the majority of the permanent teaching staff are usually full professors, and they are promoted more or less automatically, usually between the ages of 45 and 50. Salaries are based mainly on age rather than achievement, so there is less pressure to obtain large research grants and publish than in the West. The patron client network is still important for initial appointments, rather as it was in the UK before the 1970s, though jobs are gradually being more widely advertised in the press, and in some cases there are competitive interviews, as in the UK.

Publication is also easier in Japanese universities than in the West, as much of it takes place in the journals (*kiyō*) published by the departments themselves. Many faculties have a range of house journals, some of which appear several times a year, and many professors publish the bulk of their work as a series of papers in these journals. Often these papers form the basis of a later published monograph or PhD thesis. When I first joined Shiga University in 1994, only about 15 per cent of the professors had doctorates, but by the time I left the number had increased considerably. More newly recruited staff had PhD's than had been the case in the past, and some of the older and more senior staff had also completed dissertations, on which they had apparently been working in their spare time for many years.

The Japanese publishing industry, whether inside or outside the universities, is much more efficient than that in the West, and turn round times are breathtakingly fast, a matter of weeks in the case of many journals, and six months at the most in the case of books. To judge from Japanese work in my own field of anthropology, there is probably less emphasis on theory than in the West, and much more on the analysis and presentation of data. Bibliographies and notes are correspondingly shorter, with fewer references to the secondary literature. They are, of course, well aware of recent theory, but theory seems not to have become an end in itself as it has for many scholars in the West, and the empirical basis of many writings in Japanese is correspondingly richer. As a source of primary material, it is quite likely that in 20 years' time many of Japanese publications will prove to be more useful than their counterparts in the West. The difference between the two systems is driven by the western emphasis on peer review, which can be extremely time consuming, and by the competition amongst scholars to publish with the most prestigious – and therefore over-subscribed – journals and academic presses. As I have argued elsewhere, this emphasis comes at a cost:

theoretical inflation at the expense of empirical data and the fact that many publications are out of date by the time that they appear. These are not problems in the Japanese system.

This touches the important problem of what has been called the 'intellectual balance of payments' between Japan and the rest of the world. While Japanese scholars are extremely familiar with what is happening in the West, the reverse is seldom true. I have argued that the main reason why Japanese scholars do not publish in the West is not that they cannot, but because it does them little good if they do. They can publish in Japanese much more quickly, and probably more people will read their work, as print runs in Japan also tend to be longer than in the West.

This is not to say that there is no dead wood in the Japanese system: there certainly is, but so far there has been no cash on the table in the form of golden handshakes to persuade non-performing teachers to retire, as there has been in the UK. There is a particularly serious problem in the area of language teaching, as many Japanese professors appointed to teach English language are actually specialists in literature, unable to speak English with any great fluency. This seems to be a problem which will remain until the current generation of teachers retires, unless the money for staff development and early retirement schemes is made available. Native English speakers teaching English on short-term contracts as 'foreign lecturers' (*gaikokujin kôshi*) often find the situation particularly frustrating, and it is also probably why many of the most trenchant critiques of the Japanese system, including accusations of xenophobia, come from this group. *Gaikokujin kôshi* are in a rather special position in the Japanese system because they are viewed as younger, short term appointees for whom the usual appointment requirements in terms of publications do not apply. In many cases they do not take part in the professors' meetings, and so are unable to contribute formally to discussions on teaching issues. However, this is partly offset by the fact that they usually receive higher salaries and more generous allowances than are available to the regular teaching staff.

Since the 1980s, it has also been possible for national universities to appoint foreign teaching staff to regular teaching positions in other subjects. To date, very few foreigners have been given unlimited tenure, the usual arrangement being three-year contracts renewable by mutual consent. However, in these cases the *kyôjukai*, or professors' meetings, in which the final power of appointment lies, tend to distinguish carefully between those professors whom they regard as 'permanent' and those whose appointments are definitely limited to two or three years. The result is a system rather similar to the situation in the UK since the abolition of tenure in 1987, where some appointments are regarded as quasi-permanent, while others are regarded as appointments on a limited contract, even though there is no legal basis for the distinction. In private universities, foreigners are more likely to be treated in exactly the same way as their Japanese counterparts, with tenure until the normal retirement age rather than shorter renewable contracts.

A final change to note in the Japanese university system during the 1990s has been the increasing number of female staff. Currently still only about 13% of university teachers are women, though even this is a big improvement on the situation before 1990. In the negotiations I have been involved in over new appointments in Japan, the gender of the appointee has never actually been an issue: the aim is to appoint the best candidate available at the time, and increasingly the best candidates are women.

## *Students*

In discussions of Japanese universities, there is often surprisingly little mention of the students, except to note that they often do very little work, and that they regard university as a 'moratorium' between the various hells of examinations on the one hand and salaryman life on the other. Certainly the 'examination hell' of the entrance examination is still a reality for many students, though the fall in the birth rate is having an effect here as well. Some of the more progressive schools are realizing that with the declining pool of applicants, they have to be more proactive in selling themselves to students, or in devising other systems for admitting them as alternatives to the traditional examinations. In the leading private schools, the ratio of applicants to places is about 10:1, and the fees which they can command from these applicants are a major source of revenue, but in other schools the number of applicants is perilously close to the number of places to be filled, and falling all the time. Two other markets are also being increasingly explored. The first is that of mature students (*shakaijin*), including both younger people who went straight into work after high school and people who have already retired. The second is that of overseas students. But for the present the majority of students in most universities are recent graduates from high schools, with no previous work experience apart from casual part-time jobs, and often with less experience of the outside world than is the case in Europe or America. Taking a year out to travel before going to university is still rare. In provincial universities like Shiga, a larger proportion of Japanese students attend a university near the family home, and a larger proportion still live at home with their parents than is the case in the UK.

It is true that a lot of students spend more time and energy on clubs, sports and social life than on studying, though as a group they are not as totally inert and unmotivated as they literature often makes them appear. As Lee-Cunin makes clear (1999), they often have very clear and highly critical ideas about the teaching at the university, and ways in which it should be changed. Even the university clubs to which a large proportion of them devote such large amounts of time are often linked indirectly to their career prospects because of the links they provide with 'OB's' (from the English 'old boys') who can introduce them to prospective employers. However, a substantial minority are not members of clubs at all, especially those that live further away, or those doing part-time work (*arubaito*) before or after classes. The oft-noted tendency for some students fall asleep in classes is as much due to unsocial working hours (e.g., in 24 hour restaurants or convenience stores which rely on student labor) as to a lack of motivation. But it also means that they are paying for their courses with their hard-earned cash, and are often critical of the fact that they are not getting value for money.

In the Heisei Recession it has become increasingly difficult for students to find jobs on graduation, and the amount of time spent finding a job has increased as a result. Many students now spend the greater part of their final years job hunting, going from interview to interview, sometimes having to attend more than one in different parts of the region on the same day. Applying for a job to a particular company does not just involve one interview, but many visits for orientations, interviews and tests, strung out over a long period. Professors increasingly advise their students to accumulate most of the credits necessary to graduate in the first three years, leaving the final year almost entirely clear for finding a job, apart from writing their graduation theses. At Shiga,



even the thesis itself often took low priority as well, most of the writing being left until the New Year vacation, just before the deadline for submission. However, accumulating credits in just three years leaves many students without sufficient time for study on many of their courses, resulting in further tiredness and reduced motivation.

The Ministry itself was well aware of these kinds of problems through its own survey data, and by the late 1990s it took them seriously enough to propose yet another round of reforms to the higher education system. In October 1997, the University Council was asked yet again to decide on the necessary reforms, and it issued its report at the end of June 1998.

### **A Vision for the 21st Century**

It is clear from these proposals that many of the fundamental problems of Japanese higher education were still the same in the late 1990s as they had been in earlier decades. The reforms proposed most recently at first sight seem far-reaching, but it remains to be seen whether they will lead to a change similar in magnitude to that experienced in the Meiji period and the American Occupation, or whether they will represent just another instance of the immobilist politics described by Schoppa. In discussing these proposals I will take as my starting point the Mombushô document entitled 'A Vision of Universities in the 21st Century and Reform Measures: To Be Distinctive Universities in a Competitive Environment.'<sup>3</sup> Despite the vagueness of the title, it does include some radical suggestions, and the impact of some of these is already being felt. Here is the gist of the main proposals, some of which would appear to have been influenced by the British experience of reform since the early 1980s.

1. The Council argues that there is a new urgency in university reform because of a number of factors including the impact of new information technologies, and the aging of Japanese society. Both of these have important implications, both for the Japanese economy, in terms of the restructuring of work and education, and for the finances of the Japanese state. Thus, there is a need for the restructuring of institutions of higher education in line with information technology, and for better provision for 'lifelong education', including refresher and retraining courses and the upgrading of professional skills within the existing workforce. A third factor which is touched on repeatedly is that of 'internationalization', and the general perception that Japan has not made as large a contribution to the international world of learning and research as it could have. Linked to this is a final assumption by the University Council, that previous expectations of the Japanese education system, both at home and abroad, have not been met, while criticisms remain unanswered. Generally it is argued that, despite the economic recession, the country should try to spend a similar percentage of its GDP on higher education as other advanced countries.

2. Against this background therefore, the reforms the Council proposes are based on four general philosophical assumptions:

- (i) The need for the qualitative enhancement of education and research, with the aim of

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<sup>3</sup> The English version is currently available at <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/1998/10/981010.htm>.

cultivating the students' ability to pursue their own goals.

This presumably addresses two related concerns: the criticism that the present educational system in Japan does not produce graduates capable of creative thinking; and the perceived failure of research within Japanese universities to establish itself internationally.

(ii) More flexible education and research systems to secure the autonomy of the universities.

The rhetoric underlying many of the reforms is that of increasing 'independence' for the universities. How far this is likely to be achieved is an open question. It could be argued that the changes which the system will take will be like those in the UK: the universities have been allowed greater autonomy in some areas of their operations, such as day-to-day decision making, while seeing new forms of control being introduced in others such as teaching and research reviews. As in the UK, there is clearly a general move towards greater managerialism and top-down control, to say nothing of the 'audit culture' discussed by Goodman earlier. Many of these measures hark back to the failed proposals of the 1970s, and to the 'model' administration of Tsukuba University.

(iii) Improvement of the administrative structure to facilitate responsible decision-making and implementation in support of (ii).

The main proposals here involve strengthening the role of the university president by making it more managerial, and appointing vice presidents to assist him. This would also involve the reduction of the power of the professors, through their faculty meetings (*kyôjukai*), and of the deans of faculties.

(iv) The individualization of universities and the continuous improvement of education and research by establishing a plural evaluation system.

There are two ideas combined here. The first is that of the differentiation of the university system, so that different schools perform different functions and operate in different niches of the market. The reports suggests that schools should try to develop in line with their 'individual philosophies and goals' and search out their own niches in the education market, with the more prestigious national universities concentrating on postgraduate training. It sees the private, public, and national universities in Japan as performing complementary functions. The national universities are seen as important in helping the nation meet its manpower requirements, and in developing fields of study for which there is little 'social demand' but which are still seen as being in the public interest. The report also remarks, rather ominously, that those national institutions that do not fulfill these functions will possibly need 'restructuring'. It is less concerned with the public universities, run by cities and prefectures with their own locally-defined agendas, or with private universities, which will survive or not as the case may be, depending on their success in marketing their courses. Finally, the University Council seems to have taken on board the need for outside evaluation systems, other than those of the Ministry itself, in monitoring university performance.

3. Based on this economic context and general assumptions, the University Council goes on to make a number of concrete proposals, some of the most important of which I list here:

(i) The government should use its power over the admissions to state institutions to reduce the number of undergraduates during the period 2000-04 in line with the drop in the birthrate. The hidden threat is that of restructuring, merging or closing institutions for which it sees no need in terms of 'national manpower requirements'.

(ii) The report notes that if the birthrate declines and the number of students stays the same, then the student body will become increasingly diverse in terms of ability. Therefore in order to assure the quality of its graduates, the universities will require 'more rigorous grading', an area hitherto left to the discretion of the professors with no external assessment or scrutiny.

(iii) The drop in the birthrate also suggests the need to restrain the number of new institutions, allowing only those 'indispensable for Japanese higher education to maintain its vitality and to develop further in response to social changes'. In other words, only innovative new programmes for which the Ministry sees a direct need will be authorized.

(iv) However, it thinks that graduate schools should be expanded, both in terms of number and quality, in order to enhance research, professional education, and Japan's international academic profile. One of the concerns in the report is clearly to establish a degree of competition between graduate schools, thus helping standards rise to an international level. Within institutions it also suggests giving graduate schools more autonomy, with their own teaching staffs and administrative structures, a trend already visible in the larger national universities such as Tokyo and Kyoto.

(v) The goals of more flexible education and research systems require administrative reforms as well, to help increase institutional autonomy, and facilitate decision-making and evaluation. The most important of the changes proposed are (a) strengthening the position of the university president as institutional manager; (b) the appointment of vice presidents to help with management; (c) improving evaluation of teaching through 'self-monitoring, self-evaluation, course evaluation by students and the like', and (d) reforming teaching and the curriculum, e.g. by encouraging professors to make available course syllabuses and lecture outlines – suggesting that in many institutions this is still not common! It also envisages devolving to universities minor administrative decisions, such as changing quotas of students in particular courses, changes in the curriculum, setting salaries, and employing part-time staff. In line with the new managerialism, the report suggests setting up a university senate 'responsible for deliberating important administrative matters of university including drawing up basic principles for curriculum formation and forming curricula for whole university's education [sic]', in other words laying down guidelines within which the professors meetings should operate. It is made clear that the administration can listen to the opinions of the faculty and senate, but that it will have to make the final decisions itself.

There are also suggestions that staff recruitment might be made more transparent – e.g. by advertising jobs – suggesting that many positions are still filled through personal contacts.

(vi) A number of suggestions are made directly in relation to students, as ways of bringing about both greater specialization and integrating study with practical experience. ‘Individual universities may require their applicants to have studied the subjects necessary for university education at upper secondary school or may teach new students the basics of university studies after the admission.’ It suggests that students’ interests should be stimulated ‘by providing them with more opportunities to experience advanced education and research on the university level’. It also suggests that students should be prevented from registering for too many courses in any one session, to increase their motivation on the courses for which they are registered. However, it is also envisaged that the more able students should be able to accumulate credits sufficiently quickly to graduate after three years and proceed straight to graduate school. It calls for shorter master’s programmes, and for the introduction of a system of two admissions a year, in April and October, to facilitate links with those foreign universities whose academic years start in September or October.

(vii) There are comments on the university’s links with industry, and the need for industry to interview and recruit final year students during the weekends, rather than disrupt their university education during the week. This has been a major problem since the mid-1990s when firms abolished the moratorium on hiring students before September. The result was the students were soon spending the whole of their final year job-hunting rather than studying. Links with industry and other universities are also encouraged, e.g. by allowing up to 60 credits for extramural study or courses taught in other universities, enhancing in-service training, and using the teleconferencing facilities, which an increasing number of universities now have.

In the summer of 1999, the Ministry made the proposals more concrete by issuing details of the reforms, describing them as a process of *dokuritsu gyōsei hōjinka*, or turning the national universities into ‘independently administered institutions’. This led immediately to considerable opposition from the universities, as can be seen from the summary account by Bern Mulvey, an associate professor at Fukui University (Mulvey, 2000): ‘these reforms would result in sweeping changes to the way National Universities are organized and administered. Indeed, if fully implemented, these proposals would effectively end the privileged status of these institutions, placing them under the care of overseers with broad powers – including the ability to cut funding to wayward schools and/or remove ineffective teachers.’ Not surprisingly they soon led to a proliferation of protest meetings and web sites, in a demonstration of concern rather untypical amongst Japanese academics. As the phrase *dokuritsu gyōsei* (independent administration) suggests, these reforms will in theory make the national universities independent from direct Ministry control over decisions about the curriculum. On the other hand, they are now to be managed by government appointees, with a national advisory committee evaluating the performance of both managers and institutions. The managers will be responsible for improvements in performance in three important areas: education and research, serving the local community, and in expenditure. The implied

threat is that managers and institutions which fail to perform will be sanctioned in some way, perhaps through cuts in funding and faculty. The parallels with the experience of the UK over the last two decades are increasingly clear. A final concern is for security of employment. As Mulvey points out, government statements have increasingly stressed the need for a reduction in numbers of staff. At first the government talked about a 10% target that could be met through natural attrition, but in later statements this figure increased to 35%, which would mean making some people redundant. Also of concern has been the way in which the government has gradually moved the timetable for the implementation of reforms forward, curtailing the time for debate before they are implemented.

Not surprisingly, the proposals have led to calls for clarification, of the composition of the standards committee which will evaluate institutions, of the kinds of people who will be selected to run them, and the nature of the goals to be achieved in the name of 'efficiency'. There is a suspicion in many quarters that the government is simply looking for an excuse to close down the lower ranking institutions, and to replace tenure with short-term contracts, as was first proposed many years ago. Mulvey also articulates the fears of foreign faculty that their positions might be among the first to disappear, and that the status of the foreign lecturers will become even more precarious than it has been in the past. However, he does admit that many of the proposed reforms are to some extent overdue.

What seems to be happening in Japan is similar to the experience of other advanced countries: a drop in the birth rate, demands from government for accountability and control in public expenditure, and the linking of higher education with specific national goals in terms of skills and manpower training. Government rhetoric suggests that institutions are becoming more independent, while the skeptical faculty sees them as coming under greater control. They have become adept at negotiating the complex system of rules established by the Ministry and local officials, and any new arrangements are likely to erode this hard-won room for maneuver, at least in the short term. Traditionally in the Japanese system many of the decisions were taken by the professors' meetings: the situation was rather like that in British universities before the 1980s, when the senate and faculty boards took the major decisions, and the vice-chancellors were academics rather than managers. In many British universities this is now changing fast, and the Japanese national university system now looks set to move in the same direction, whether its professors like it or not. But the Ministry proposals are also affecting the private universities. APU itself had to gain Ministry approval before opening, and it continues to be monitored by the Ministry during its first four years of operation. Not surprisingly, many aspects of its day-to-day workings are influenced by the latest Ministry thinking: a strongly managerialist administration, a heavy emphasis on course evaluation, accelerated graduation for the more able students, and two admissions a year to facilitate links with foreign universities. At one level, the APU experiment is an attempt to come to terms with two chronic problems in the Japanese university system: the falling number of domestic high school graduates, and the slow pace of internationalization across the higher education sector as a whole. By letting the opening of the university go ahead, the Ministry presumably classifies it as one of those projects which are 'indispensable for Japanese higher education to maintain its vitality and to develop further in response to social changes'. It is also an interesting example of collaboration between a private educational trust and a prefectural

administration. At another level, the foundation of the university is linked to flows of Japanese capital during the postwar period, and the emergence of new economic and political groupings in East and Southeast Asia. Japan is bound to be at the center of these developments, not only because of its economic clout, but also because of the sheer size of its higher education sector. In his paper earlier in this issue, David Palfreyman presented data showing the enormous gap in financial endowments separating the best American schools from those elsewhere. Even if Japanese universities are unable to compete with the 'best of the West' in terms of financial endowment, quality of students, or research facilities, Japan will probably still emerge as the leading player in the realignment of higher education on the western side of the Pacific. And if the changes currently taking place within Japanese higher education enable Japanese universities to assume this role, they will probably be seen by Japanese politicians and officials to have succeeded.

### **Conclusion**

Having myself experienced the rapid changes which took place in the British higher education sector in the 1980s, many of the current changes taking place in the Japanese system have a ring of familiarity. Not only are they impelled by forces similar to those which affected British higher education in the 1970s and 80s – economic recession, the demands of government for accountability and value for money, and concerns over the quality and skill levels of manpower – but the British experience has been important to Japanese official thinking, in the formulation of both goals and the methods with which to achieve them. At one level, these kinds of changes are probably inevitable in late capitalist societies, in which the state has assumed much of the burden of the reproduction of labor power, but in which it is also accountable to the taxpayers and the public at large. Demands of relevance, value for money, service to the community and so forth therefore loom large in the discourse and rhetoric of reform. Japanese higher education clearly needs to move in these directions and out of the ivory tower, so the question becomes one of how to achieve this without destabilizing the national university system and killing off the motivation and enthusiasm of those working within it.

What I have suggested in this paper can be summarized as follows. In spite of the many pessimistic accounts of the Japanese higher education system and its apparent failure to reform, it can be argued that there have been changes over the last decade, and that many of these have been positive. Even though some observers see the Ministry as the problem rather than the solution, new recruits are constantly being drafted into the Japanese bureaucracy, and they are well aware of what is going on in other advanced industrial countries. Even though the Japanese higher education system has traditionally drawn on models from Germany and the US, the British experience has also clearly been of great interest to the Japanese Ministry, not least because both countries have experienced similar fiscal and demographic constraints over the last three decades. Where the Japanese system differs from the British system is in the existence of a very large private university sector. Here the Ministry seems to be taking the line that they can leave the fate of the private universities to the market: some institutions will sink and some will swim. But, as in the case of APU, the state, whether national or local, is also willing to support enterprising private initiatives, particularly if they appear in line

with Japan's broader educational and foreign policy objectives.

As in the UK over the past twenty years, university teachers in Japan will probably have to cope with a far less cozy environment in the future than in the past, with higher profile management, more monitoring, less autonomy in teaching and examination, and more scrutiny from outside agencies. As in the UK they will probably find that preparing for all this is time consuming, and that they end up working much longer hours as a result. If Japan succeeds in becoming the major player in higher education in East Asia, there will be a payoff both in terms of greater resources and prestige for those in the more successful schools. However, lower-ranking institutions will find it increasingly difficult to keep going, unable to compete either for the best students or the best teachers, and unable to go overseas to find new markets.

Finally, the students will find themselves competing in an increasingly competitive labor market, so that they too will change. If more consistent national standards for examination and assessment can be introduced, then presumably the companies will be able to hire on the basis of merit, rather than simply on the basis of the university from which the student graduated, and that will have a knock-on effect on what students study and how they study.

To conclude, despite the skepticism of McVeigh and others, after ten years of the Heisei Recession, it could just be that Japanese universities really are on the threshold of changes as momentous as those that took place during the Meiji period or the American Occupation. Sectors of the Japanese economy which seemed equally unchanging in the 1980s, such as the banks and the car makers, have seen considerable restructuring over the last ten years, so it is possible that education will follow suit. According to Schoppa, change is most likely to take place in institutions when there is basic consensus between the institutions themselves, the politicians, and the bureaucrats. A degree of consensus on the need for change in Japanese higher education now appears to exist. Whether this will ultimately lead to radical transformation, or only to continued immobilism disguised by the rhetoric of reform, will only become apparent over the next few years, as the implementation of the bureaucrats' vision for reform unfolds against the background of accelerating demographic decline.

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