

# Japan's Higher Education and Miyazaki International College: Problems and Solutions

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## **Japan's Higher Education and Miyazaki International College: Problems and Solutions\***

**Hisayasu Otsubo**

Higher education in Japan has gone through various changes since the Meiji Restoration. The establishment of Tokyo University and later on other national universities which followed the institution of the university system, its elitism and the spirit of competition, the entrance examination race, the demands of students and parents for changes that led to peaceful as well as violent protests and, finally, the attempt to internationalize education that began in the latter half of the 1980s are all a part of the necessary process that education and society had to go through — a long process that will continue to develop in the future.

The birth of Miyazaki International College (MIC), one part of this process, is a response to our society's demand for change in the Japanese educational system. The college's purpose is clear: to answer the call for young men and women with an international orientation who can grasp the reins of leadership and guide Japan into a future which inevitably will be based on international cooperation and understanding. In this paper I will describe the circumstances that led to the establishment of Miyazaki International College, explain its social and educational purpose, and offer a justification for its existence.

### **Higher Education in Modern Japan**

#### ***The Founding of Tokyo University***

The Meiji Restoration was a turning point in the history of Japan, heralding the country's modernization. It began with the dissolution of the 260-year reign of the Tokugawa Bakufu (Shogunate) and the transition from a nepotistic bureaucracy which favored one's family line to one which saw the rise of lower level samurai in the bureaucracy and their subsequent usurpation of power. These changes were symbolic of the Rokumeikan Era which provided the catalyst for Japan's rapid modernization process.

Tokyo University was founded in 1877, 10 years after the Meiji Restoration, in the midst of historic changes. Although the establishment of the university signifies the birth of Japan's system of higher education, it was not something that happened

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\* Hisayasu Otsubo is the founder and President of Miyazaki International College. This paper is a revised version of a speech given on May 17, 1994, as the inaugural lecture of the Miyazaki International College Lecture Series. The author would like to acknowledge his gratitude to Dr. R. Birnbaum of MIC from whom he received valuable suggestions, and Mr. L. Walker of the Miyazaki Educational Institution for his English translation and advice.

overnight. The newly founded Tokyo University included a medical school, a language school which also conducted research on Western culture, a law school, a school of engineering, and, a later addition, a school of agriculture, all of which had existed independently.

The founding of Tokyo University was a politically-inspired answer to the demand for Westernization. While the nation's leaders directed its creation, the policy of Westernization was not implemented in a uniform manner. The university's educational philosophy gradually took shape following several clashes with counter-ideologies from Japanese and East Asian traditions. Be that as it may, and the government's fiscal difficulties notwithstanding, active efforts were made to employ foreign educators and to nurture future personnel through an enthusiastic policy of sending increasing numbers of young scholars to study abroad.

The development of Tokyo University was one aspect of the Westernization process that the nation's leaders deemed necessary for Japan's modernization. Required to nurture government personnel, strictly speaking, the university's objective was the education of bureaucrats well-versed in law, and a technocratic elite trained in medicine, engineering, and agriculture who were recruited on the basis of academic merit regardless of their connections. This policy liberated the nation from the tradition of "family line" and nepotism; it gave talented and hardworking young men the hope of upward career mobility and social rewards. In addition, the civil service examination system recruited personnel of superior academic ability who filled key positions involved in the coordination of the activities of central and local governments and industries. Members of this administrative elite were accorded an almost star-like quality and were the source of much pride in the communities from which they hailed. This tendency continues today.

### ***The Birth of the Imperial University System***

Even after the creation of Tokyo University in 1877, higher education in Japan was slow to develop. However, after 1886 when the Imperial University System was established Japan's higher education system was set on a smooth course.

At first, because it was the only university in Japan and thus the only member of the Imperial University System, Tokyo University became known as the Imperial University. Its name changed to Tokyo Imperial University after the establishment of the Kyoto Imperial University in 1897. However, after World War II the university came to be known once again as Tokyo University. In the years following 1897, Imperial Universities were to be founded in Osaka, Kyushu (Fukuoka), Nagoya, Tohoku (Sendai), and Hokkaido (Sapporo). The origins and the development of the Imperial University System are described in detail by Shigeru Nakayama (1978) in *Teikoku Daigaku no Tanjo (The Birth of the Imperial University)*.

The basic components of a university in the Imperial University System were the students, instructors and the buildings. First, students were recruited and then instructors were appointed who *lectured* to the students in direct contrast to the *tutorial* style of a private university where instructors opened a 'business' at which students eventually gathered. In the Imperial University System, first a system was employed and then the buildings and the campuses were established. Next, foreign scholars were appointed as instructors, and the most promising students from the various feudal domains were admitted. All aspects of the Imperial University System were planned and implemented by the government. From the system and the buildings themselves to the founders, the University System was an institution created solely by the government.

At the new universities, students enrolled in career-track courses. The faculty was provided with resources to maintain their livelihoods and they dedicated themselves to academic pursuits.

The government's main goal was not the promotion of academia, as such, and it did not intervene in the running of the universities. This aspect was left up to the whims of

individual academics. The government's main objective was the education of necessary personnel — in other words, the development of an administrative elite chosen to answer the call of national duty (Nakayama, 1978: 74-75).

The term *Teikoku Daigaku*, or in English, "The Imperial University of Japan" (Nakayama, 1978: 26) indicated the system's governmental support and establishment and was not an attestation to any imperialist tendencies. The word 'teikoku' (empire), had a pleasing ring to it which commanded respect and made it trendy, much in the same way that the term 'international' is now in fashion.

### **Higher Education in Pre-war Japan**

After the establishment of the Imperial University System, higher education in Japan made significant advances. But as the Tokyo Imperial University became what may be regarded as the pinnacle of Japanese education, the issue of academic freedom, which is so central to the spirit of a university education, caused a number of disputes between the University and the government. During this time, there was also rapid development in the fields of science, engineering, agriculture, and the humanities and social sciences (especially Western studies).

The firm establishment of the Imperial University was not the only phenomenon of this era. The same time period also saw the rise of a kind of liberal arts education practiced by old system high schools, vocational colleges which offered an education in practical skills, and private institutions which developed as an alternative to the national universities. However, unlike American universities, private institutions in Japan generally did not attain high status. For the purpose of nurturing career militiamen, there were also the Navy Cadet Academy, the Army Cadet Academy, and Navy and Army post-graduate schools where only the elite and most capable were educated.

### **Academic Reform After World War II**

In the midst of extensive social reform after World War II, education went through far-reaching changes. The most outstanding phenomenon during this period was the rise of national universities in provincial regions under the new university system from what were once vocational schools or senior high schools. Of course, these universities ranked below Tokyo University which had maintained its position as the summit of university education. More important, however, is the fact that universities were no longer places reserved for members of elite families but had become institutions which were open to all able students.

Private universities, many founded before the war, rapidly developed into institutions that admitted students on the basis of merit. Since 1975 they became the beneficiaries of *The Private University Promotion Act* and eventually the growth of these institutions became the general trend of higher education in Japan.

Still, higher education in Japan is controlled by Monbusho policies. Despite various reforms, standards set by Monbusho tend to restrict new institutions to certain patterns which are aimed at the formation of "mini-Tokyo Universities," that is, institutions modeled on Tokyo University. It is difficult to establish a unique Japanese university. Yet attempts are constantly being made to build innovative colleges that do not fall into a traditional pattern.

To that end, detailed standards for new universities have recently been abolished and replaced with more open-ended and easy-to-interpret regulations. Even so, many of the new regulations are still inflexible and have created restrictions that do not meet the essential needs of higher education: for example, regulations that attribute a good deal of importance to faculty publications as a criterion for instructor evaluation, while paying almost no attention to teaching records.

## The University Reality

Disputes over government intervention into university management, which had occurred before World War II, led to a constitutional provision for academic freedom (The Constitution of Japan, Article 23). With academic freedom as a springboard, the concept of self-governance became popular, and legislation was soon passed to ensure that the faculty council held the real power to manage university affairs (*Educational Servant Special Act*, 1949). The historical process of academic freedom in Japan is different from that of the West. As was mentioned above, in response to the government's interference into the affairs of the universities, since World War II universities have taken great pains to see to the firm re-establishment of freedom and self-governance.

In recent years, Monbusho, in an attempt to allow students more freedom of choice in curriculum, has relaxed the formerly rigid and uniform high school curriculum. Students now have a greater number of elective courses to choose from and high school guidance is leaning more toward the "expression of one's individuality." It is, indeed, a fact that there is more curricular freedom in high school, and students now have more "unique" schools to choose from.

While each Japanese University has its own entrance examination which is structurally different from that of others, students who wish to attend Tokyo University, or other highly ranked national and private schools, find that they are unable to take advantage of the "freedom" to choose elective courses. The content of entrance examinations of these universities, derived from high school curricula, is regulated by Monbusho and made uniform in all schools under its jurisdiction. There is very little room for the employment of unique criteria for evaluating students. Also, the seemingly universal reliance on high standards in various higher educational research and recruiting institutions, such as Obunsha, Kawai Juku and Shinken Ado, which administer trial tests that are believed to give an "accurate" assessment of the academic standing by applying values of deviation to their scores, forces even more uniformity. This is so because their examinations are also based on Monbusho-regulated high school curricula. Moreover, this "deviation" based ranking system is used nationwide by high schools and universities to evaluate the "quality" of applicants which in effect determine the "quality" and level of difficulty (rank) of the institutions which admit them. Therefore, despite Monbusho's attempts at promoting uniqueness and freedom in education, it is unlikely that significant distinctions can be made between institutions which all apply the same criteria to student evaluation or that high school students will be ensured the ability to nurture their individuality, especially if Japanese society remains dependent on Monbusho regulation of the academic system.

Thus while universities have begun in recent years to make efforts to distinguish themselves from others, they are still using a deviation value system of ranking — a clear sign that they have not yet freed themselves from the rut of a value system that highly evaluates the education of 'superior students' within a uniform system.

"Academic freedom" and "self-governance" were meant to be beneficial to the university as an academic body, not to the occupants of its "ivory tower." Yet, regardless of the various post-war educational reforms, Japan's higher education system still clings to the pyramidal ranking of institutions with Tokyo University at its pinnacle. There is little possibility that this trend will change, in light of the reality that newly established universities tend to mimic Tokyo University's educational system and organizational structure, and that Japanese society supports this system of ranking.

It is well known that before the war there was a great difference between the starting salaries of graduates of the imperial universities and graduates of private universities. At present, however, such discrimination has been eliminated and the setting of salaries is unbiased. Even so, it is evident that Tokyo University graduates still enjoy a high status in the Japanese bureaucracy. This status, though, is not a recognition of the particularly high standards of Tokyo University; rather, it is the result

of an image created by Japanese society. It cannot be said that Tokyo University commands a high international reputation. It has become famous for admitting students who have come out ahead in the college entrance race, not because of the quality of its curriculum or the rigor of its academic standards.

Since World War II, private universities have adopted an innovative spirit and effective management practices, spurring more Japanese people to seek higher education. However, like national universities, private institutions, too, desired far-reaching changes in educational content and standards, beginning with the student movement of the late 1960s which aimed at restructuring the university system. It seemed at first that reforms would take place from within, but the student movement soon adopted an air of violence, quickly losing all rational support and ultimately ending in failure.

Since 1990, Monbusho has led an effort for further university reform through a system of self-evaluation, but the reality is that progress is slow. It will be a long and hard road to the point where those in the university system will be able to succeed at attaining an internationally-acclaimed status in the same way that various other sectors of Japanese society have done. In a society that cries out for internationalization, the university in Japan still monopolizes the domestic market and as long as those in the university system are in the comfortable position of life-time employment, educational reformation can not be easily achieved.

### **The Demand for a New Style of University — Miyazaki International College**

#### ***What is A University?***

What is a university? What should it be? What relationship should a university have with society? It is doubtful whether these questions are discussed adequately or that their importance is recognized in demands for university reform.

Even though universities and colleges no longer exist for elite social groups, and even though colleges should no longer be merely stepping stones to careers, many people still see a university education as a required stage on the road to successful careers and comfortable lifestyles. This situation is perpetuated by those who view knowledge as a commodity for sale and create institutions that use the diploma as a lure to keep students tied to the school system. Furthermore, college professors exploit this situation to create an environment in which they are not required to do anything that disrupts their own comfortable lifestyle or that of students. Full-time professors exploit their specialties in the name of “contributing to society” so that they can earn extra income for themselves. In other words, their enthusiasm is for part-time work, not for their students who passively attend lectures, take notes without any active participation, hold part-time jobs to enrich their lifestyles, take final exams and graduate. Colleges allow this to happen. The reality of the situation makes one wonder how many individuals affiliated with universities take higher education seriously.

A university is not created for re-teaching the basic education that students obtained in high school. Yet regardless of the current emphasis on specialist education, specialized knowledge quickly becomes obsolete. And the fact that the majority of people who have a college education answer, ‘NO,’ when asked if university education is useful to them as members of the working world makes one wonder what these people did during their four years at a university or college.

Universities do not exist simply to graduate students, just as their sole aim is not that of the absorption of knowledge by students. I believe that a university should be a place where students learn the real meaning of learning. University professors must put all of their efforts into helping students to do this.

Nor should a university be a mere research facility. However, the fact is that American and Japanese universities are becoming more oriented toward research and forgetting the academic welfare of students. This, according to Smith, is a tendency that “began with the rise of the modern university, when teaching ‘loads’ began to be

reduced so that research-oriented professors could pursue their research...The vast majority of the so-called research turned out in the modern university is essentially worthless. It does not result in any measurable benefit to anything or anybody ... and, most important of all, it deprives the student of what he or she deserves — the thoughtful and considerate attention of a teacher deeply and unequivocally committed to teaching” (Smith, 1990: 6-7). This conclusion is supported by the research of scholars studying Japan as well. Frackmann and deWeert (1993: 136-37), for example, argue that Japanese academics are mainly oriented to research rather than to teaching. Although this is in direct contrast to a study done by Boyer (1990) that showed that 70% of American professors were more interested in teaching than in research, according to Smith (1990: 6-7) university professors in the U.S. turn to research as a way of relieving themselves of the responsibility of teaching students, which should be their main concern. This phenomenon is no different from that of Japan where faculty spend more time outside the university classroom than with their students.

Of course, one cannot and should not deny the importance of research. It is through innovative and timely research that a modern education system develops. However, the university in Japan has been slow to recognize that curriculum, teaching, research, and governance must adapt to changes in the needs of society (Kitamura 1991: 315). Research by itself has no referent in the real world and is not the be-all and end-all of the mission of any liberal arts institution. There can be no teaching and the student cannot truly learn without personal interaction with his teachers (Smith, 1990). A university professor must think first and foremost about the education of the student. Whatever research is conducted must first be innovative and for the purpose of teaching the student how to be innovative in his or her own research, not for the sake of the research itself.

### ***The Internationalization of the University***

There is no other national higher education system in a developed nation as far behind in promoting internationalization as that of Japan. Its capacity for receiving foreign students is poorly developed, the number of foreign students is small, and they are often given special treatment and have classes separate from Japanese students. The majority of faculty are Japanese; foreign faculty number less than 2% of the higher education system.

More importantly, the internationalization and sophistication of the content of education lags far behind current standards. Even now there are those who narrowly believe that Japanese and Asian culture can only be taught by Japanese and Asian people. Even though Japanese professors teach Western philosophy and literature, there seems to be resistance to the idea of American educators teaching the literature or history of Japan.

This problem is one of simple prejudice. The more fundamental problem is that “teaching” is identified with “lecturing,” a mere forcing of “knowledge.” As I pointed out earlier, universities are not businesses that sell knowledge. The professor should be a “leader” who guides the student in the development of thinking skills. An international point of view on a problem cannot emerge without an international student body and professors. This is the essence of internationalization.

### ***Small Classes and Active Learning***

Few would argue that small classes are not beneficial at all levels of education. However, the realization of this, especially in Japan, is difficult. One reason is that there is still the preconceived notion that the classroom is a place where the student is to quietly listen to what the professor has to say. Also, from a managerial and economic standpoint, it is not profitable to promote small class education. Furthermore, if the point is to listen quietly to a lecture, there is no reason to have a small class; one can conduct a very effective class using a microphone.

It is not possible to conduct a lesson in this way, however, if the educational objective is to provide a classroom situation where the student can positively and actively participate in organized discussion directed by the instructor. I don't believe that it is necessary for me to discuss the effectiveness of discussion-style classes in this paper.

### ***Learning a Foreign Language***

It is no simple task to learn a foreign language. The difficulty that the Japanese face in learning English, which is very linguistically different from the Japanese language, and the effort that is consequently necessary is far greater than that which French, German, or Spanish speakers face in doing the same thing. However, as long as English is the international language, its acquisition becomes fundamental to international education and is unavoidable.

The study of foreign languages had been incorporated early into Japan's system of higher education. In fact, at one time the standard curriculum required the study of at least two languages. Changes in the standards governing university establishment, however, relaxed this regulation. It became possible for students to decide what foreign language would be studied and how language acquisition would be incorporated into their individual curricula. I personally applaud the establishment of this policy by the university council. It was as a result of judgment based on a reflection on foreign language studies that would not have been possible in the past. Criticism of English teaching by the intelligentsia resulted in a wide range of changes in secondary school English education and it is believed that changes will continue to occur.

Yet, there is still an abundance of problems with the teaching of English in higher education, which arise from the treatment of English as an independent academic field and the lack of consideration of English conversation. It is especially odd that English should be considered an independent subject area when the majority of students studying it have no desire to become scholars of the English language or literature. And of course, it goes without saying that the goal of English conversation is to be able to speak and to comprehend what one hears. But if English conversation skills fail to break the barriers of daily use and to incorporate second-language fluency as one's specialty, there is no point to studying it in the university.

English as an international language is simply a means of communication. University level English education should not be a repetition of high school English. It should be a program that promotes and develops the student's ability to use the language so that it can become a means of intellectual communication.

### ***Teaching How to Think vs. The Simple Absorption of Knowledge***

I stated previously that the university should not be for the mere acquisition of information. This proposition deserves serious consideration.

Attending lectures, being tested on their content, and subsequently graduating is still the general trend of university education in Japan. The pattern of educators imparting to students knowledge derived from their research or other studies has given birth to this comfortable style of lecturing. However, if this is to be the only correct system, the university as we know it would become obsolete in this age of multimedia — one could simply go to the library to read a book. It is no longer impossible for us to listen to the lectures of foreign scholars — one can simply view the lectures of such eminent scholars on video. From a managerial point of view, there would be no reason to employ full-time faculty at high salaries. It would be simpler to provide lectures by buying the video-taped lectures of popular scholars.

However, because the university is the kind of institution that it is, its existence gets its meaning and justification from the fact that it provides a place for the student and teacher to think and share ideas and for students to learn how to learn. A lecture alone, without the support of more personal academic exchanges between the student and instructor, does not fulfill the essential purpose of higher education.



## *Miyazaki International College's Challenge*

Miyazaki International College is attempting to make a monumental change in the educational tradition that Japan has promoted since the establishment of Tokyo University. MIC does not follow the pattern of a traditional university; its students select from an array of interdisciplinary courses that span the fields of art history, history, literature, philosophy, religion, anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology. They are taught the value of learning how to learn, for example, to tackle environmental problems from the standpoint of the humanities and social sciences as they relate to North America, Europe, and Asia, developing global perspectives and enriching their understanding of the world system. Our professors have thrown out the traditional concept of lecturing — they refuse to peddle knowledge. Attesting to the benefits of small class size, they work closely with students in an interactive relationship that nurtures the academic development of both parties. The academic program guarantees a period of study abroad for students so they can strengthen their bilingual skills while conducting research in their areas of specialty at some of the best institutions in the United States, Britain and Australia. These concepts embody the original reason for the university and the new mission with which our culture and generation have charged it, that is, academia for the sake of academia, and the development of an interdisciplinary study of international and intercultural relationships. Although these are not in and of themselves new concepts, this kind of university is new to Japan, and there are very few like it in the world.

I do not dispute the idea that colleges should provide stepping stones for young professionals and scholars. On the contrary, this is one of the university's highest goals. However MIC's structure and curriculum are meant to most effectively develop simultaneously the tendencies toward internationalization that are ever-present in modern Japan. Institutions established in the Tokyo University tradition do not effectively deal with such tendencies. MIC's educational objective is twofold: the promotion of life-long education and the nurture of young professionals and scholars committed to bettering the world system.

While preparing students to acquire the skills necessary for careers which will be beneficial to Japan and international society, we teach our students the importance of recognizing causal relationships in problem-solving. We do this through active learning, providing them with a base of knowledge and skills that they can carry over into their individual areas of specialized research or future employment. This is significant because through active learning students are taught how to think, solve problems, offer suggestions, be conversant in their disciplines, and most importantly, how to learn more about their areas of study. Furthermore, in the same way that we demand social and academic fluency of our students, we also demand linguistic fluency. The English education promoted by MIC is not simply English language for language's sake — English is taught through a coupling with content courses in order to strengthen the student's facility with the language. Of course, each of these skills in certain combinations or individually is probably developed in the traditional college as well, but MIC offers the student the opportunity to develop all of these skills interactively. We believe that a cosmopolitan and unique professional or student must incorporate all of these skills into his daily discourse.

I believe that this is how truly international or cosmopolitan individuals can be cultivated. Much of Japanese society is still under the influence of traditional ideas. Many view higher education as a doorway to a secure professional and social life rooted in the traditionalism of Japanese society with few concrete and spiritual ties to international society. If Japan is to take its proper place in the world system and thereby play a role in its own future, there is no longer any reason to establish more

mini-Tokyo Universities. The objective must now be to nurture a new breed of student, both a professional and an international citizen. Just as the road to true international cooperation and understanding is arduous and covered with many obstacles, the road to social acceptance and understanding of our educational mission will be hard and may be long, but we at Miyazaki International College are here for the duration.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the process and problems of the development of the traditional Japanese university. The education of personnel in demand by the government and large industry at the beginning of the Meiji Era was the fundamental reason behind the establishment of Tokyo University, which remains at the apex of Japanese higher education. Japanese society, furthermore, approves of the existing ranking of universities with Tokyo University as the ideal to which all must strive to attain.

However, speaking in extreme terms, the only measure for evaluating universities in Japan is the current system of differential ranking. It is problematic that the individuality (uniqueness) of the institution is not the measure being used.

Even now the most common teaching method in Japan is to hold large lectures in large lecture halls. But, while the lecture style can be said to be an effective way to pass on information and is a sound method of financial management, it is certainly not the best way to promote education. One questions whether the university of our time should be a place for the mere passing on of information. In other words, in an era of rapid progress in scientific technology, the specialized education one receives in a university quickly becomes obsolete. I believe that what our society really demands now are people with global perspectives who have strong problem-solving skills.

Likewise, there are a great many problems with teaching English. There is probably only a small percentage of graduates from traditional Japanese universities who can hold intellectual conversations in English. This fact stands as evidence that there is a need for us to reevaluate our system of language teaching.

Miyazaki International College has, with new ideas and new educational objectives, taken its place as a participant in Japan's higher education system. While it cannot be denied that its challenge has some experimental aspects to it, the college was established with the firm conviction that it would by all means succeed and with the intention to make every effort to guarantee that success.

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