

Contributed Article to NIKKEI by Professor Takashi Onishi

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The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) notice about restructuring humanities and social science programs caused a large backlash, leading to desperate efforts to deal with the controversy. Dr. Takashi Onishi, President of Science Council of Japan and President of Toyohashi University of Technology, accepts the ministry's explanation, but also argues for the necessity of an open debate on the nature of the Japanese government's support for universities.

This summer was likely an unpleasant one for humanities teachers at public universities in Japan, due to the announcement by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology released by MEXT on June 8 calling for national university departments involved in the humanities and social sciences to be abolished or converted to fields that better meet society's needs.

In addition to protests by humanities and social sciences teaching faculty, many organizations with researchers in the hard sciences, such as Science Council of Japan of which I am president, also protested.

MEXT then repeatedly explained that "the word 'abolish' in the notice referred only to abolishing courses in teacher-training faculties which do not focus on the acquisition of a teaching license, of which there is an excess due to the decrease in demand for teachers in primary and secondary education, and did not refer to humanities as a whole." In September, a MEXT official attended a meeting of Science Council of Japan Executive Board, and explained the ministry's intent. With these explanations, I now understand the intent of the original notice.

However, the problem has not been completely dealt with. In particular, the foreign media is continuing to criticize the notice.

Bloomberg, a major news agency known for its economics news, ran an article on September 20 saying that MEXT was trying to return Japan to the manufacturing-focused economy of a developing country by eliminating social sciences and humanities and focusing on the hard sciences. The article also mentioned that this major policy change, which would affect economic policy, was carried out "via an unaccountable and opaque process."

MEXT has already released a statement in English about the notice. However, it is not as important as the notice by the minister. Therefore, it is possible there will continue to be reports that Japan plans to eliminate humanities and social science

programs and is moving towards a low-productivity economy. MEXT must be more active in attempting to provide explanations both within Japan and abroad.

On October 15, Science Council of Japan released its second statement from its executive board regarding this matter. This is because we would like to use this debate, which received international attention, as an opportunity to discuss not just the humanities and social sciences but the future of Japanese universities in general.

Recently, there has been an ongoing debate within Japan regarding the future of universities. The Japan Association of National Universities announced its Vision for National University Reform in September this year, emphasizing the importance of carrying out research and educating students to be internationally competitive, in addition to becoming important centers for their respective regions.

Keidanren, as representatives of the businesses who will hire these students after they graduate, released a statement requesting graduates with stamina, intelligence, and international competence, as opposed to just graduates who are ready to work immediately as mentioned in the MEXT notice.

From the demand side, the keyword for education in Japanese universities in the future, particularly at the faculty level, is globalism, followed by interdisciplinary knowledge, with specialization only being third or fourth most important. There are many opportunities to gain specialized knowledge over a lifetime, so it is more important to learn about and understand languages and culture, and to gain flexible and varied intellectual curiosity.

Universities would likely prefer more emphasis be placed on specialization, but in respect to the importance of educating students with global competence universities and the business world generally agree.

Just when both universities and the business world were making proposals and the movement towards university reforms was gaining speed, the Ministry of Finance acted in a way that dampened this enthusiasm. At the end of October, a subcommittee of the Ministry of Finance's Fiscal Council released a proposal that public funding for national universities, which forms the basis of their operations, be reduced by 1% every year, with universities making up the difference with their own income.

The main source of this income for national universities is tuition. This proposal from the Ministry of Finance is essentially suggesting that tuition be increased to over ¥900,000 a year by 2031, 1.7 times what it was before the change. This will lead to more children not going to university in order to avoid the financial burden it would cause their parents.

Of course, the fact that Japan has a large national debt is a matter of concern for

citizens throughout the country. The fact that the Ministry of Finance, which holds significant responsibility for the size of the debt, is willing to limit higher education in an attempt to cut costs is a clearly foolish policy that will lead to a vicious cycle.

Currently, one out of every two 18-year-olds goes to university. The Japanese government should be creating a policy to allow any youths with the desire to go to university to be able to do so without having to worry about the financial burden.

All of Japan's Nobel Prize winners have been graduates of national universities, and universities also play a major role in providing workers for the business world and research with business applications.

The people of Japan will have to make a decision on how to balance the budgetary need for pensions, healthcare and welfare in response to the aging society, and the cost for higher education and other methods to help the next generation develop.

In the October statement by Science Council of Japan's executive board, we proposed that a forum be established with participation by all the universities, academia, the business industry, and the general public. I would like to make this forum a place where university reforms and government support for universities is debated, in order to ensure a stable foundation of support for universities, the institutions where the future of Japan is created.