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# Education in Japan: The School as a Business, Teachers and Students as Commodities

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## ABSTRACT

Education is one of the keys to individual and national advancement and development in life. In many countries university education is open to all while in other nations such as Japan, it has to be paid for. Irrespective of the costs, university students should receive a quality education from universities and universities should expect quality academic work from students. As educators are professionals working in the field of delivering education they should have even higher expectations for the quality of education being delivered than students. However in today's Japan are these expectations of quality teachers and students actually being met? This paper firstly provides a general overview of post war university educational in Japan. Then university education is examined in detail to see if these academic expectations are being met and argues that on the whole they are not. The areas where Japanese universities are deficient, namely in the quality of education delivered and treatment of teachers and students alike are then examined. Also areas where the university's actions have been detrimental to the development, academic or otherwise, of students and teachers alike are covered. Later it examines the university as a business rather than an educational establishment to try and explain the actions of universities that are often contradictory to the educational ideals expected by teachers and students at university. Lastly it offers suggestions for improving the quality of education at Japanese universities and shows why this is necessary for the survival of universities in Japan.

**Keywords :** Education in Japan, University, Business, Commodities

*The inalienable and universal rights of people are safeguarded largely through the process of education. Schools are established to supplement and enrich the experience of people. …In a democracy, individual human beings are, we repeat, of surpassing worth. Their interests must not be subordinated to those of the state. (U.S. Department of State, Report of the United Education Mission to Japan, Tokyo Supreme Command of the Allied Powers - SCAP quoted from Okada U.S. Department of State, Report of the United Education Mission to Japan, Tokyo Supreme Command of the Allied Powers (SCAP) quoted by Okada, Akito 'A History of the Japanese University', in Eades, J.S., Goodman, Roger & Hada, Yumiko (Eds.) The Big Bang in Japanese Higher Education: The 2004 Reforms and the Dynamics of Change, Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2005 p.37-38)*

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The above was a key phrase from the report on education conducted by the U.S. Education Mission to Japan in 1946 after the war's end. Ignoring examples from U.S. educational history that show the double standards this quote brings up in that regard [2], the actual ideals behind the quote were broadly accepted in Japan and universities were organized in line with the above principles of universal access based on ability (and of course given its U.S. provenance, the ability to pay) and limited governmental interference. However, when the Japanese regained political control from the U.S. after the end of the occupation, the educational policies were altered. The 'reverse course' in Japanese politics vis-à-vis the U.S.'s occupation policy is very well known, but less well known is the 'reverse course' in educational matters carried out by the post war Japanese government. Both reverse courses were in furtherance of conservative ideological aims, the former based on U.S. geopolitical aims, and the latter based on national Japanese political and pro business aims[3]. The main complaints from conservatives and business leaders in Japan had been that of right wing ideologues the world over - too much freedom, too much democracy, not enough attention paid to business and of course for Japan, too foreign in nature. The resultant changes in education policies reflected these business complaints.

The effects of the Korean and Vietnam wars had lead to a booming Japanese economy by the 1960's. This in turn led to a vastly increased demand for educated workers to be cogs in this economic machine. Explaining this economic boom is out-with the scope of this paper but Beasley explains this in detail for those interested [4]. Needless to say this resulted in a more technical focus for Japanese higher education and those school students who showed a lack of academic brilliance were directed to newly created vocational schools set up to suit big business, a practice in direct opposition to the earlier U.S. sponsored ideals for Japanese education quoted above. Many students reacted negatively to these new policies as shown by the many student protests of the time. Potential employers later discriminated against these student protestors. This was meant as a signal to other students to toe the pro business line, and as a result many of the protestors could not find employment afterwards. As these were often individual students or small groups, detailed records of this discrimination do not exist. However business retaliation and discrimination against activists is well documented by the various union groups in Japan, with Doro Chiba, the railway workers group having detailed records on their homepage of such practices [5].

By the 1970's and 1980's Japan, like many industrially advanced nations was embroiled in the middle of the Cold War and conservatism dominated the agenda politically, economically and educationally. The UK's education system was under attack by Thatcherite policies at this time, and Japan's conservative PM Nakasone was also assailing Japan's education system. The principle idea was to make universities much more business like and end governmental financial support for them, thereby making the universities more responsive to big business. Opposition parties and some dissenting right-wingers caused Nakasone's proposals to fail [6]. However PM Koizumi was more successful in this regard, starting to promote his reform ideas in the late 1990's as a backbencher and bringing them to fruition after becoming PM in 2001. His idea was to streamline bureaucracy (including education) any way he could to reduce the burden on the state as a way of stimulating the economy, and he was successful in pushing his reform agenda through [7]. This had a major impact on education in Japan and was called the 'Big Bang', as its effects were so dramatic and far-reaching in potential.

These reforms converted the elite national universities into private corporations and resulted in their employees losing their coveted civil servant status and benefits. As a consequence these workers also lost their prized 'jobs for life' and other benefits, as universities were now much more interested in cost cutting than their employee's economic welfare as a result of their new corporate status and the pursuit of profit that accompanied this. Also they were now in the cutthroat business of trying to entice students at a time when the declining birthrate in Japan meant decreasing numbers of students were there to be enticed. This coincided with a period when the numbers of universities were increasing as a by-product of the reforms as many two-year colleges changed their status to four-year

universities to try to be more competitive, as the polytechnics did in the UK when they became universities. These student demographics and university numbers are well covered by Yada [8] and show a steady increase in the numbers of universities and a decline in the number of students enrolled.

Also paralleling the UK's educational reforms was the Japanese idea of the Center of Excellence Program. In the UK the various departments of each university were assessed and given one of six grades between 1 and 5. More details are available on the homepage of the Higher Education Funding Council of England but basically these grades take into account the research activities conducted by professors at UK universities [9]. As polytechnic colleges were also upgraded to university status they were also assessed, although they received much lower scores than the older universities in general. The result was a two-tier university system in the UK, at least in practice if not in principle, as the lower the levels of research conducted by universities, the lower their score, and therefore the lower their student application numbers, funding and reputation. This vicious circle was repeated to the detriment of those lower ranked universities and the quality of their students, as only so-called 'low-level' students ended up studying at those institutions in the UK. However for high-level students at the so-called 'elite', 'red brick' or 'Uxbridge' institutions the picture was not rosy either. As the reputation, funding and quality of students actually attracted depended in large part on research, this was and is given a much higher priority than actual teaching and results in the better professors teaching less and less to conduct the research necessary to get a higher ranking for the university. Yet these talented professors are the reason many students applied to go these UK universities in the first place. Many of the top professors also end up doing high paid consultancy work for corporations instead of teaching, as this is also a money-spinner for the universities and good for their reputations although it can and does often end with conflicts of interest. Soley covers this conflict of interest/business aspect of academic entrepreneurship and its implications in great detail[10] and is well worth reading as he makes some very strong arguments against this practice being widely adopted.

The Japanese implementation of these kinds of policies has mirrored that of the UK in some respects and differed in others. The Center of Excellence program has been around in various forms since 1993 and initially was a program that focused on the top 30 universities in Japan and was designed to distribute research funds [11]. This was in recognition of the fact that Japanese universities did not fare well in world tables and was an attempt to remedy this situation [12]. Complaints from the many universities excluded from this program lead to it being made open to all departments in all universities, although in practice only a select few have actually received funding from it for the most part [13].Again like the UK, this focused professors on research more than teaching and given the low quality of teaching at many Japanese universities this has more far reaching consequences than in the UK, as will be seen later. However professors in Japan have not really benefited from corporate contracts, unlike their British counterparts, as most industrial research in Japan is carried out at corporate research laboratories, not universities anyway [14]. Also the fact that many professors publish in Kiyo (in house, non-peer reviewed) journals does not exactly impress the corporate world in terms of standards [15]. Furthermore corporations in the past wanted graduates that would obey the company line and not ask questions and universities catered to that demand very well as university was seen as a break between the hard work of school and entrance tests to get into university and the hard work of a salaryman after university. So the image of university research as high quality was not one held by big business so they were unlikely to contract out work to universities.

Also unlike the UK, Japanese government subsidies are not only linked to quality of research but also on condition that universities do not accept too many students. This has also caused problems for universities as students take entrance tests at many universities and make a final decision on which university to attend after all their results are in. So universities have to make offers to potential students knowing that not all offers will be accepted depending on the student's entrance test results elsewhere. If the universities

accept too few they lose out on tuition revenue, if they accept too many they lose out on government subsidies as too many lessens their quality according to Monbukagakusho, the education ministry [16]. This then raises the controversial subject of the entrance tests and how they work.

Universities in Japan have traditionally used entrance tests to select potential students. This practice was also carried out at schools and even some elementary schools as entrance to a good school at the bottom of the education escalator could carry students all the way up to a good university because good elementary schools prepared students for good junior school entrance tests and so on up the educational chain. The universities often had their entrance tests on the same day meaning students had to choose which university tests to sit with great care as the number of entrance tests they could sit was limited by the dates available. Preparing students for these tests was of major importance and as a result a whole industry developed, that of the Juku or cram schools [17]. In fact one mother killed the two-year old daughter of a friend as her daughter had lost out on a prestigious elementary school place to her friend's daughter on the entrance test scores.[18]

The entrance tests themselves have been heavily criticised by many testing experts and not just for the fact that they are conducted as early as elementary school. McVeigh explores the failings of the examination system in Japan in great depth and claims the exams only simulate testing.[19] Also the tests have been faulted for their inaccurate measurement of intelligence or academic ability as they only measure how well students can remember unconnected facts, leading to the system being called 'examination hell'. The Juku schools make a lot of money from this system as those Juku that have good pass rates for prestigious universities charge large sums of money to the families of students, putting extra pressure on the students to pass because their families have spend a lot of money on them.[20]

However the key criticism is that the endless focus on rote learning has an adverse effect on the critical thinking abilities of students. Students think that education is just the process of remembering things to pass examinations rather than learning for its own sake or looking for practical applications of things they learn. Lee-Cunin has conducted in depth interviews with students on exactly this point.[21] McVeigh goes even further and argues that this focus on factual information at the expense of critical thinking and practical application of theories is responsible for much of Japan's current economic woes. His basic argument is that if people are educated to be mindless automatons purely to function in an economic system, then the system produces only mindless automatons that do not practice critical or original thinking. The low levels of Nobel Prize winners from Japan, even though it has a large number of universities, students and funding, would seem to support this theory. This then translates, in McVeigh's opinion at least, and here this writer partially concurs, to a lack of continuing economic success. For economic success to occur and continue, companies need workers with a spark of originality. This lack of originality of thought is borne out by the numerous examples of innovation of existing ideas over new invention in Japan. Japan's students and eventual workers have had this inventive streak educated out of them so to speak. Interviews with Japanese students for their views on university and its purpose seem to back this assertion up.[22]

Apologists for Japan and its education system argue that Japan still had a great deal of economic success and growth in the Cold War 'bubble years'. However this was when Japan was given economic and trade carte blanche, relatively speaking, by the U.S. in return for being a bastion of anti-communism in the East during the Cold War as any examination of Japan's supporting role in the two Asian wars and U.S. geopolitical strategy well illustrates. This is no longer the case given the changes in the international geopolitical strategy of the U.S. in the post Cold War world.

Also changing is Japan's population. Currently Japan has one of the oldest populations in the world and a huge section of this population (27.3%) will be over 60 by 2025.[23] This population problem is made worse by some peculiar Japanese factors. Faced with a declining

population more and more women were needed in the workforce. After getting into the workforce they achieved a level of independence they did not previously have in Japan's male dominated society. Women are now therefore marrying later and choosing careers ahead of families in larger numbers, an issue that caused a leading politician to remark that women were only 'baby making machines' and should not be working.[24] With Japan's famously low birth rate, partly caused by the cost of having a baby in Japan and also due to many women putting careers ahead of having families as mentioned above, enormous population problems lie ahead for Japan. However even if the government could get policies in place to boost the number of childbirths where every other attempt to do this has failed, it would not bear fruit (or potential students) until 20 or so years later when it would be too late. Furthermore that is assuming a policy could be found that would persuade women workers to have families instead of careers, and also persuaded families that the cost of having families was worth it, not an easy task given the costs of having and raising a child in modern Japan, conservatively put at 4,400,000 yen up to age 6.[25] Kinmonth has written extensively on the many estimates on the effects of this declining population on education.[26] The bottom line is that at some point in the next few years the number of university age students will be equal to the number of university places available. This will mean that except for a few elite universities the vast majority of higher education institutions will be competing for a limited number of students, instead of the more traditional idea of students competing for a limited number of places. Also the universities will not be too selective about which students or how academically gifted they are as they will be more interested in bottoms on chairs than brains in classrooms, as Kinmonth has commented on.[27] Indeed this is happening now with many lower level universities lowering the bar on their entrance tests just to get enough students to operate 'normally'. So universities are faced with the prospects of declining student numbers in Japan in both the short and long term.

This has had an effect on entrance policies, not the least of which has been a decline in 'academic' standards required to pass the entrance tests to ensure student quotas are met. In this writer's own classes over the past 7 years textbooks that were fine for the levels of first year students in the first 3 years have proven too difficult for many students in the last 4 years as the declining student numbers have started to have an effect on the quality of students passed. Of course this is most pronounced at the lower level universities but even the higher ones have to take slightly lower level students than in the past to make up their quotas. These slightly lower level students at the higher institutions are still fairly high-level students relatively speaking, and therefore this does not pose many serious problems. However this does cause a knock on effect further down the pecking order and does result in students passing the entrance tests that would not have done so a few years before with the resultant drop in standards. Indeed in one first year university English class a student could not count from 1 to 10 in English, yet this was after 6 years of English classes in Junior and High school. This is no doubt a product of the school system which was itself 'dumbed down' under the Yutori educational policies that started in the 1970's in response to heavy school workloads, an issue well covered by Schoolland.[28]

Also lowering the academic standards are the increasing numbers of students who gain entry to universities without taking the entrance tests at all as there are a number of other ways for students to gain entry. The first of these is for the student to be recommended by a teacher at their school. This is usually done with weaker students who would not be able to pass the lower entrance test anyway and again universities are reluctant to turn away paying students so these students get admitted. Then there is the Admissions office (AO) method whereby the student does not need a teacher's recommendation or to pass the entrance test as long as the Admissions Office is happy for the student to attend after an interview. According to McVeigh 40 - 50% of university students get into university without sitting any kind of entrance exam.[29] Therefore discipline problems at university are also starting to mirror those of schools as students with behavioral disorders that traditionally never went to universities in the past now can enter, as almost anyone can

get into university given the demographic / educational problems in modern Japanese universities.

By pretending to accept only good students i.e. those that supposedly pass a rigorous entrance test, and by misrepresenting the kind of education those students will get at university,[30] many universities are not providing a decent level of education that actually prepares students for life after their undergraduate studies. The fact that many employers are now complaining that the freshmen they employ straight from university are not up to the standards they expect bears this out.[31] This is ironic given employers' past reluctance to hire highly qualified and capable people due to fears that they would not easily adopt company practices that went against their training. This probably contributed to the lowering of academic standards as universities thought this was what industry wanted.[32] Indeed there is no corporate recognition (financial or otherwise) for post-graduate qualifications in most employment sectors. Businesses frequently stated they wanted 'blank slates' as McVeigh has said, that could be easily molded by the company into the desired shape. They did not want any critical thinkers, yet now they do and it is a bit too late, as the educational damage has already been done.

All of the above factors have undoubtedly resulted in lowering the quality of students at universities in Japan but the quality of teaching also needs to be considered. There has been much research done on the pedagogical aspects of teaching and what the best practices in teaching are at universities. Of particularly note, in chronological order, is the work done by Postman and Weingartner,[33] Freire,[34] Highet,[35] Barzun,[36] Weingartner,[37] and Leamnson.[38] These and others' work on the same areas, that of conveying a love of learning for learning's sake, all stress the importance of developing critical thinking in students as a way of fully realizing their academic potential, not to mention awakening their political and social consciousness (in the case of Freire) and developing them as people who can make positive contributions to society. A read through the available literature cited in this paper so far, especially McVeigh's work, quickly shows this is not happening in Japan to any great extent with the obvious detrimental side effects on students. Indeed he is not a lone voice here as many others have echoed his take on the quality of Japanese university education, most notably Cutts.[39] When their descriptions of what goes on at universities in Japan are compared to the usual ideals of what should occur, the reader is often left stunned. Their work abounds with stories of grade inflation where most students were given 'A' grades by their professors, irrespective of whether they attended classes, studied or did the course work. Furthermore this is merely the tip of the educational grade-inflating iceberg. Also most educational specialists recognize that the first semester and first year are crucial times for university students. This is when students are most receptive to change, as everything is new to them. Yet many Japanese universities deliberately assign Japanese teachers to first year students to make them feel more comfortable, something at odds with good pedagogical practice.

Admittedly these writers above were not looking at the 30 so-called elite universities but were focusing on the rest, the vast majority of the 714 institutions that are not in the elite group of 30 universities. Despite McVeigh and Cutts's lack of focus on the elite schools, to a certain extent these top schools are not immune to some of these goings on either, especially the practice of hiring foreigners for three year contracts only, or in rare cases very long tenure tracks while giving Japanese professors automatic tenure, or shorter tenure track positions. Hall covers these, and other equally discriminatory labor practices in other industries, in great detail.[40] The activist Debito Arudou also has a section on his website about such discriminatory goings on at Japanese universities.[41] Both of these sources have negative things to say about the elite universities too and Kyoto University had its exchange program with some U.S. universities cancelled after the U.S, students complained about the low quality of courses and Kyoto is one of the elite universities in Japan.[42] The end result is again obviously not beneficial for the students as they are being deprived of good teachers as the teachers are continually moving from school to school just when they are getting settled and into their teaching stride so to speak. The pressure of having to find a

new job every three years, not to mention the time and effort involved in such job searches obviously affects the amount of time and effort that teachers can put into their teaching. And again the students suffer.

This author can also add some personal experiences and those of colleagues to further highlight the practices of many universities in Japan. The following is merely a small sample to illustrate what passes for a university education in many Japanese universities as well as some of the morally dubious labor practices. In all cases names of teachers, students and universities have been omitted for the sake of legal reasons and privacy. In general, foreign professors are put on one-year contracts renewable twice at Japanese universities as stated above. The longer foreigners teach at an institution the more difficult it becomes for the universities to get rid of those teachers under current labor laws so these contracts limit the time foreigners can teach there and make it easier to get rid of them.[43]Another main reason for this is that the longer foreign teachers work there, the higher their salaries become and the more they know about how the system works, both outcomes being something Japanese university management do not want in this day and age of corporate universities and pursuit of profits. By recycling foreign teachers from one university to another in this way they are permanently kept in low status, low salary positions and will almost certainly never receive a retirement pension as they are never in one job long enough to qualify, unless they are lucky enough to move from one university to another for 25 years and manage to stay with universities that have linked pension plans for all 25 years, a very unlikely occurrence. So foreign teachers definitely do lose out compared to their Japanese counterparts, and for the most part they are aware of this. This hardly acts as a motivational device to get the best out of most foreign teachers. However, even when they do perform well, in general they are still shunted off after three or six years of service. Also most fulltime teachers lose their last bonus when their contracts expire as the bonuses are usually paid at the beginning of in June and December yet contracts expire at the end of March and are never paid a bonus for the last 4 months of their contract. Furthermore teachers who leave early if they are lucky enough to find another job can also find that their old universities have cancelled their previously accepted publications as well as asking for refunds of research grants. Yet these are the lucky teachers by comparison with their part-time brethren who are not allowed to publish and who do not receive bonuses or research grants in the first place.

The majority of foreign university teachers are employed on a part-time basis (and indeed many of the full-time teachers maintain part-time jobs at other universities just in case they cannot find another full-time job when their current full-time contracts expire) as McVeigh's figures show.[44] The percentage of foreigners teaching at universities in 1996 in full-time positions was 2.97%; while those in part-time positions were 5.82%, almost double the full-time rate. Given the fact that all universities in Japan are now de facto private, the capitalist imperative now means more universities than ever are looking for ever greater profits at a time of dwindling student numbers. This has resulted in many younger Japanese university teachers getting the same treatment to that previously reserved for foreigner teachers. This author personally knows many young Japanese teachers with PhD's who cannot get full-time work even though some chairs of university departments do not have PhD's. Indeed one of the ironic benefits (in terms of transparency) of the Center of Excellence program is that all teaching staff have to put their academic records, research records and publication records online for Monbukagakusho (the Japanese Ministry Department that oversees education and gives out research funds) to check for quality if their university employers want to apply for government research funds. These are also open for viewing online by other staff at the same universities and needless to say many 'professors' were reluctant to complete these online questionnaires. This lead to at least one university this author knows of actually threatening to eliminate professors' in house research grants if they did not complete the forms, as this non-completion of forms adversely affected the university's chances of receiving bigger research funds from the government. From perusing these records many well qualified foreign and younger Japanese teachers who were denied full-time or tenured positions were disgusted to learn that some of the

full professors who had been lording it over them with their seniority had in fact never even been to graduate school or had quit before finishing masters degree never mind a PhD. Furthermore many of the tenured teachers in lofty, tenured positions had those positions granted to them many years before, most likely via connections (the kohai / sempai - junior / senior effect) whereby professors take in their favorite students to the faculty and groom them and promote them in their image in return for their loyalty in the departmental infighting irrespective of their academic qualifications. These kind of educational dinosaurs were to some extent weeded out of the UK's system when it went through the change to a largely privately funded system in the 1980's and 1990's, so it will be interesting to see if the same happens in Japan given the influence of these kinds of 'professors'.

Therefore with the lack of credentials of some senior teachers in the university system it is no surprise that some of the classes at university are not taught according to good pedagogical practice. More than once this author has heard on good authority that many professors do not wake up sleeping students if they are not disturbing the class and this author has actually seen this through a classroom doorway on more than one occasion. Also it is a fairly common practice for many professors to give out 'A' grades across the board as has been mentioned previously. In fact at one well-known university the practice was so prevalent that the management actually sent out a circular asking professors not to do this! Also a frequent complaint of students is that professors have little time for them, or that their classes are boring.[45] One student told of how her professor taught them how to write love letters when he was supposed to be teaching an Academic Writing class. Another student told of her professor not allowing her to give a presentation on her chosen topic (the Iraq War) because he felt U.S. citizens might be upset by it. This was even more staggering when the student in question explained to this writer that it was a class with only Japanese students, the only U.S. citizen present being the ethnic Japanese professor who refused her permission for her chosen topic in the first place. Another example is of a teacher who wanted to run an extra-curricular class in the evening with specially invited guest experts to talk to the students on their areas of expertise. The Chair of his department refused him permission on the spurious grounds that as all classes were for the purpose of furthering the student's knowledge, no outside experts or guests were allowed to come in and talk to them! This same university takes such great care of its students that they have no student union, do not allow student feedback questionnaires to classes of less than 10 students (i.e. the worst classes) and the questionnaires that are actually given out are collected by the actual teachers in the classrooms themselves, an action that violates the ethics of anonymous questionnaires in the first place as the teachers can see who writes what and alter the comments if they so desire. And the university allows this.

Furthermore many departments actually sanction some more of this type of behavior, as the following examples will show. Another new teacher at a well-known school with a high reputation, on finding out and complaining about the low part-time salary, was told by a senior professor in the department to schedule the class tests in the second last week of term instead of the last week, meaning the teacher would not have to come in and work in the last week, the official test week. Doing this would raise his effective hourly rate, as he would still be paid for that last class anyway. No thought of the effects of this, (i.e. losing a class from that semester's schedule), on the students was considered. Yet another student told of not being allowed to do a certain number of classes in one year by his department (even though it was feasible in terms of work-rate and timetabling and had in fact been done before) so she would then incur another year of fees. Yet another professor was pressured by his university to pass a student who had attended no classes at all in the first semester, as the student was a star of the university's baseball team. The university wanted the student to be given a paper to write to make up for his absences even though the class was an 'Oral Communication' one, not a writing class. Only the fact that on principle the teacher concerned refused to give in lead to the student eventually being failed. However rather than set a good academic precedent the department just made sure that particular teacher did not receive any more sports scholarship students. These sports

scholarship students are a source of pride for many universities and the students are seldom made to sit the entrance test, instead being admitted purely for their sports abilities. In another case the process of hiring replacement three-year teachers dragged on for so long through the first and second choice lists of candidates that the department concerned chose lesser qualified candidates from the second choice list out of expediency as loss of face would be involved by going back to the better quality candidates rejected from the first round's list, and loss of another Saturday (i.e. a non-working day for the personal committee) would be lost if they had to interview the people from the third choice list. And on and on it goes, and this is just a small sample of the type of things that happen often in Japanese Universities, and are sanctioned by the universities themselves in many case.

The fact that these and other kind of anti-academic practices are not only condoned by universities and departments but actually put in place by the universities and departments comes as no surprise to those who work at universities in Japan. For the most part the administrators are the real power at universities. Department heads that have power are those heads that work hand in glove with the administrators to carry out policy as dictated by administrators; the more the heads do not 'rock the boat' the more 'power' they are given by administrators. With the financial tightening required due to the demographic situation this has become even more pronounced. For a good example of the kind of power the administrators have at Japanese universities see the case study by McVeigh.[46]

There are some good examples though. This author is currently very, very happy with the work environment at International Christian University as it has been and continues to be one of the few oasis's in a desert of academic mediocrity in Japan but it is a U.S. style four-year Liberal Arts College and does not conform to the normal university pattern in Japan at all. And there are a few others modeled on similar lines with some universities setting up Liberal Arts divisions but these are the exceptions not the rule.

Of course students are also to blame for some of the university problems in Japan and many teachers are also critical of the students in terms of their willingness to work, respond, or even show that they are interested in learning. However the main thrust of the teacher's complaints is that the students are merely responding to the stimuli or lack of stimuli they perceive in the society and educational system they are living in and / or studying under. In effect they are the way they are because of the situation they find themselves in after receiving a Yutori education. More recently this policy has been called into question for the so-called 'dumbing down' of Japanese students after they dropped a few places in world rankings.[47] However this is arguably of lesser importance than the real 'dumbing down' going on at universities in the modern period that this paper has shown as this continues the negative effects of Japanese education on students.

The universities are not easily accepting real solutions to their problems in Japan, but the future is bleak if they do not change and it may still be bleak even if they do change, as the damage done may already be too far-gone. Japanese universities have to radically alter their previous patterns of operation. This is obvious, as things cannot continue as they have been doing. Without any changes a recent estimate is that up to 40% (or 297 universities) in Japan will close in the next few years, as without enough students they will not have enough money to survive.[48] Indeed in private universities student fees can account for up to 80% of university income and from 2000 - 2004 the numbers of universities that did not reach full enrollment (and therefore did not receive full fees) fluctuated between 28 and 41%, the variation being due to the numbers of two-year colleges becoming four-year universities as this skewed the figures somewhat.[49] So things must change radically to avoid this educational doomsday scenario.

Unfortunately the business orientation of universities has prompted them to take cost cutting measures instead of the more beneficial, radical restructuring of the whole educational system. Towards this end the granting of Japanese teachers automatic tenure or tenure track upon appointment has already started to disappear, as mentioned above, although

in many instances this does still happen but tenure itself is becoming the exception rather than the rule on cost grounds. Again this writer has knowledge of where this has happened regularly in recent years, when better-qualified foreign teachers have been passed over in favor of lesser-qualified Japanese teachers. Activist and academic Debito Arudou maintains a website with a black list of universities that treat foreign staff differently to Japanese and a green list for those that give comparable treatment with the black list being far longer than the green one.[50] Also many universities have started to subcontract their English language classes to chain language schools like Berlitz to save money on salary costs, although without any corresponding drop in tuition fees for students and even though Monbukagakusho has stated this is illegal.[51] Some universities have gone even further and set up their own Eikaiwa (low quality, chain type language schools) on campus to skirt the law and send their students there under the impression they are getting a high quality university education, while most of the teachers are not usually qualified or experienced enough to be university teachers for the most part, some English teachers are not native speakers and all are earning far less than normal university teachers.[52] So cost cutting is definitely occurring in the educational sector, partly out of normal corporate desire for profits, but also partly in recognition of the hard times ahead when places will outnumber students and it will be survival of the fittest economically speaking.

In terms of the number of people in higher education Goodman has compared the growth of the percentage of the population in higher education in various developed countries and Japan usually comes out ahead of the rest,[53] although this high percentage of people in higher education does not reflect the quality of the education actually received as this paper has shown, or of the effort put in by the students, also as discussed above. With the coming availability of higher education to all in the near future, some sort of system is necessary to ensure that standards do not drop even further. The elite universities will always get the most academically gifted students as their reputations ensure the best candidates will want to go there. However, as the numbers of university age students decline so too will the numbers of excellent students, and even elite institutions will have to take some students from the second top rank to fill their places as covered above. This will then lower the median levels of students at all other universities down the line, with the lowest ranking universities scraping the bottom of the barrel to fill their places. With the average levels of student abilities dropping all down the line, maintaining standards should become even more important. Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. As competition for students intensifies, students who find one university too difficult could easily leave and transfer to another one with easier courses.[54] As the above examples have shown, the 'dumbing down' of higher education in Japan to ensure that the required amount of students get in to university for universities to stay open seems likely, except at a few elite schools that can afford to maintain standards. These kinds of policies will only exacerbate the decline of educational standards in Japan and not help the situation at all.

The only way for standards to be maintained is if another supply of students is found that can restore the element of competition for university places. One idea touted was the enticing of older, mature students into higher education. This is by no means a panacea though, as Japanese universities have no tradition of accepting mature students. Furthermore companies have traditionally looked to hire young graduates, not older ones for the 'blank slate' reasons already stated. Mature students are even more of a threat to such thinking, before considering the salaries they would have to be paid as Japan is a culture with a Confucian influenced history that usually links salaries to age. Also getting older students to re-enroll on post-graduate courses is also not a viable solution, as surprisingly most companies have no system to recognize or reward such qualifications.[55] For these solutions to work would entail massive changes in society and how it views education, and this is not likely to happen within the necessary timeframe to help the majority of universities survive the imminent crisis.

Another solution is the massive enrollment of foreign students. With Japan's Asian neighbors having large populations this also seems a good solution at first glance. Once more, upon

closer inspection, major hurdles and handicaps come to light. The first is the cost. Japan has a much higher cost of living than other Asian countries. Second is the reputation of its universities. For roughly the same costs Asian students can go to other universities in other countries with higher world rankings. Lastly is the recent backward step (in terms of integration and welcoming of foreigners at least) shown by the Japanese government's new policy of fingerprinting all foreigners upon entry to Japan. More in depth coverage of the various ramifications of this policy can be found elsewhere[56] as it is out-with the scope of this paper. In essence though the fingerprinting policy does not exactly entice foreign students to come to Japan in droves, especially given the other failings of Japanese higher education. Indeed the U.S. has seen a major downturn in foreign visitors (and students) since starting its own fingerprinting of foreigners scheme.[57]

This only leaves reform as a viable solution but as usual the trick is in the details. Good reform would involve the setting up of strict standards, something along the lines of the Center of Excellence program, but for all universities, not just the elite 30. Those that did not conform would have to go, as there would not be a big enough population with the required numbers of ready, willing and able students to support the current increasing numbers of universities in Japan. Hada has shown these increases[58] and as stated above these are mainly through two-year colleges changing into universities to be more competitive in name, if not actually in nature. Also many of the universities with medical, science and engineering schools are in a relatively safe position as these are seen as very marketable to industry and government.[59] Therefore universities that do not have these departments have been trying to merge with ones that do with the resultant effect of much bigger universities being able to practice economies of scale and therefore be in a stronger position for the future. These mergers were something that also came up under PM Koizumi's proposals for reform and now seem to be starting to happen.[60]

So in conclusion those universities that cannot merge and be competitive in terms of educational standards, reputation, and economies of scale will, as shown here and argued above, have to disappear. Given the demographic background, prevalent economic situation, current political policies, corporate needs and societal views of modern day Japan, no other alternative is possible. This means that the academic wastelands of universities in Japan may be coming to an end as only academic, professionally run, 'real' universities will be able to survive in the Japan of the near and distant future. However this will only be the case if Japan is actually interested in change for the better. As with most changes for the better, these changes will have to be people driven as corporations and governments generally will only change for profit or control, not betterment of the people or society as history has shown again and again. Evolve, improve and survive or stagnate and become extinct or irrelevant - those are the choices facing Japanese universities in the near future.

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