

Higher Education Reforms in Japan

Chrisato Nonaka^{a,*} and Sarah Phillips^{b,*}

^aUniversity of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States

^bUniversity of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Rice University, United States

*Corresponding Authors: Email: nonakach@hawaii.edu Address: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Hawai'i, United States (Nonaka)
Email: sphillips@rice.edu Address: Rice University, Texas, United States (Phillips)

This is a brief overview of Japanese higher education and its recent *kokusaika* [internationalization] efforts. Chrisato Nonaka is originally from Japan and has worked with and in Japanese higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs) for over eight years. Her current research focuses on the identity(ies) of Japanese university students. Sarah Phillips has worked in the field of international education for over 15 years with the past twelve years at Rice University where her work has focused on the development of international research and educational exchange programs between the U.S. and Japan for science & engineering (S&E) students. Her current research focuses on the motivations for participation in and impacts of international experiences for S&E students.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the Japanese government has annually spent billions of yen (millions in USD) to transform Japanese HEIs into the flagship model for the implementation of *kokusaika* [internationalization] reforms. When the idea of *kokusaika* first appeared as a keyword in political discussions during the Nakasone cabinet in the 1980s, it was used as a mantra for the modernization and transformation of Japan into a more globally competitive nation from an economic and business stand-point (Burgess 2004; Seargeant 2011). During the late 1980s to early 2000s, *kokusaika*-laden policies and programs grew in volume and became particularly important within the education sector.

Some of the major education policies and programs from this era included the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), established in 1987, and

the “Japanese with English Abilities” plan (2003 - 2008) that culminated in the Project for Establishing University Network for Internationalization (2008 - 2010). More recently, the government has rolled out large-scale *kokusaika* policies such as the Global 30 Project (2009 - 2013), the Global Human Resource Development since 2012, and the Top Global University Project (2014 – 2023). These programs seek to internationalize HEIs primarily by increasing international student enrollment, increasing the numbers of foreign faculty members and degree programs in English, and providing support for English language study and international engagement for Japanese students.

Internationalization to What End?

While these government-initiated projects are inspired by “the idea of” *kokusaika* or *gurobaru-ka* (globalization), these terms still remain vaguely defined in Japan (Breaden 2013; Rappleye 2013). In fact, *kokusaika* or *gurobaru-ka* is often used as a convenient label to promote education-related ideas or services, not necessarily as a term to define the reality of Japan where teachers are increasingly required to tend to the needs of students and their parents with diverse backgrounds (including non-Japanese-speaking background children in Japan: Nakane, Otsuji, and Armour 2015). In that sense, the current *kokusaika* policies may be largely driven by the economic or political desire to compete globally (Ishikawa 2009; Kariya 2014), rather than by the desire to respond to changing economic and population realities such as Japan’s rapidly aging and diversifying society.

This desire to compete globally is best exemplified by *kokusaika* efforts to develop “world-class” HEIs in Japan with strong showing in HEI global rankings. Despite the resources dedicated to these efforts, prestigious Japanese HEIs (including the University of Tokyo, once the top university in Asia) continue to slip down the rankings of the world’s top universities (Kyodo 2015; Kyodo 2016). To address this, Prime Minister Abe set a target to have 10 Japanese universities in the top 100 world institutions by 2025, a doubling from the five Japanese institutions then listed in the QS World University Rankings top 100 list (Kingston 2015). Although the legitimacy of such university rankings must be scrutinized for their economic, political, and methodological implications, the picture of the faltering Japanese university rankings may serve as a wake-up call to revisit Japan’s *kokusaika* policies.

Indeed, many scholars have already pointed to fundamental challenges in Japan’s effort to internationalize the higher education sector (Breaden 2013; Burgess et al. 2010; McVeigh 2002; Ninomiya, Knight, and Watanabe 2009; Phan 2013; Rivers 2010; Toh 2013; Tsuruta 2013; and Whitsed and Volet 2011). Most notably, Brian McVeigh’s (2002) seminal work on Japanese HEIs helps to understand how the higher education sector is part of the larger social mechanism that “sort[s] students in the most rational, efficient, and ‘egalitarian’ (i.e., standardized) manner” (2002, p. 41). To such an enterprise, Japanese HEIs, *kokusaika* is just an excuse to protect and promote their own economic and political agenda.

Elaborating on McVeigh’s view, Chris Burgess et al. (2010) criticize that *kokusaika* cares “less about transcending cultural barriers and more about protecting them” (2010, p. 463). In a similar tone, Jeremy Breaden (2013) argues that the nationwide *kokusaika* project may be a response to Japan’s national identity crisis and economic, social, and demographic changes. For example, the declining birthrate and aging population issues have stimulated a discussion on whether or not to amend immigration laws with the aim to secure a globally competitive workforce for Japanese industry. Thus, on the one hand, *kokusaika* can be seen as an opportunity to open up the country and welcome more students and potential workers with diverse

backgrounds. Indeed, the types of students Japan sought to attract by its call to host 300,000 international students by 2020 are the types of students that may be most helpful to maintaining global competitiveness of Japanese business and industry (Kamibeppu 2015). On the other hand, this opening may conflict with traditional views of national identity, social cohesion, and fear of demographic change (Rivers 2011). Accordingly, the internationalization of higher education in Japan must be seen as both an opportunity and a challenge.

Internationalization and English Education

With the idea of *kokusaika* now firmly established in Japanese HEI and government policy, English is treated as *the* foreign language of most significance. Understandably, such programs and policies work hand-in-hand with the current *eigo-netsu* (passion for English) among students, parents, and businesses that continue to feed into the fear of as well as the passion for *kokusaika* (Kanatani 2008). Government initiatives have also sought to increase the number of Japanese *ryugakusei* (students abroad) in response to a long-standing trend of declining participation and perceptions that Japanese students today are “inward-looking” (Bradford 2015). While the Japanese government may focus on global competitiveness as a key motivator, for students, the motivations and impacts of international study are more personal. In a series of interviews with female *ryugakusei*, Ayako Ogawa (1998) highlights how study in the U.S. can provide a sense of freedom and ability to “break-out of the mold” of Japanese culture, how English fluency may provide an opportunity to increase their standing within Japan’s male-dominated workforce, and how the experience of internship opportunities can provide an understanding of U.S. approaches that could be integrated into their field in Japan. As Lynne Parmenter (2014) notes, there is a “tension between national and global, which is still evident in politics and curricula, although it may be less true in the minds of young people themselves” (p. 212-213). More research is needed on student motivations and impacts of international engagement when

considering the efficacy of government-initiated internationalization efforts.

Conclusion

Given this background, what may be increasingly important is to listen to the often-absent voices of students and teachers at the height of such *kokusaika* efforts today. By doing so, it helps us to not only better understand the current *kokusaika* state of Japanese HEIs, but also to re-envision what *kokusaika* can look like for the higher education sector and Japan at large.

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