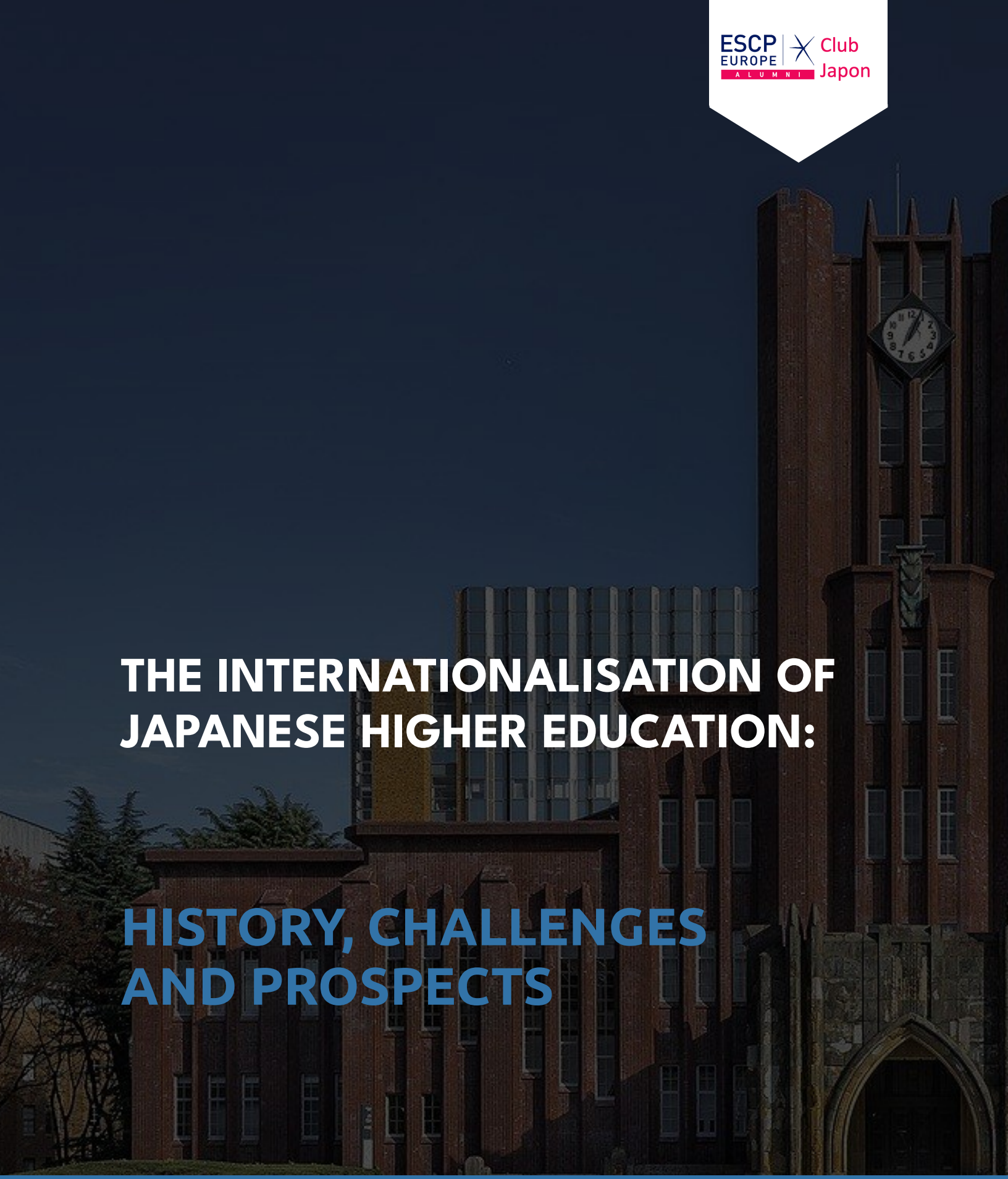


ESCP EUROPE ALUMNI Club Japon

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF JAPANESE HIGHER EDUCATION:

HISTORY, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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In summary

A few introductory words

French version

Cet article traite de la formation du système universitaire japonais depuis le 19ème siècle et de la manière dont il construit, encore aujourd'hui, son rapport à l'international. Il se penche plus particulièrement sur les multiples formes que cette "internationalisation" a pu prendre et sur les débats virulents qu'elle entraîne au sein de la société japonaise. Des débats qui changent souvent de nature en fonction des réalités de l'époque et des orientations politiques des gouvernements successifs.
Enfin, cet article s'intéresse au bilan des différentes mesures mises en place par le gouvernement japonais et analyse les défis actuels et futurs auxquels il fait face pour conserver l'attractivité et l'identité du modèle d'enseignement supérieur nippon.

English Version

This article discusses the development of the Japanese university system since the 19th century and how it continues to shape its relationship with the international community today. It focuses particularly on the various forms that "internationalization" has taken and the heated debates it sparks within Japanese society. Debates that often shift in nature depending on the era's realities and the political orientations of successive governments.
Finally, this article looks into the outcomes of the different measures implemented by the Japanese government and analyzes the current and future challenges it faces in maintaining the attractiveness and identity of the Japanese higher education model.

General overview

In September 2023, changes to several criteria in the World University Ranking, published annually by Times Higher Education, resulted in Japanese universities moving up the international rankings. The University of Tokyo, for example, rose from 39th to 29th place. Although this result was generally welcomed, many newspapers preferred to emphasise the decline of Japanese universities, even at the highest level, in international rankings over almost twenty years.

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Japanese universities among the world's top 100 universities in 2023

By comparison, China has at least 7 (source: TWUR 2023)

Indeed, the gains made by the universities of Tokyo and Kyoto, Japan's top two universities for several decades, were insufficient to put them back ahead of Chinese counterparts such as Peking and Tsinghua universities, ranked 17th and 16th respectively in the TWUR. Naturally, a university's attractiveness and performance cannot be reduced to this single dimension. Nevertheless, declining competitiveness has long concerned the Japanese government and shows no sign of disappearing, as the many critical articles published in the local and international press in recent years demonstrate. The 'internationalisation' of Japanese higher education more broadly is therefore emerging as one of

General overview

MEXT's major challenges, if not its foremost challenge, for the years ahead.

But what exactly does ‘internationalisation’ mean in this particular context? Drawing on the definition of Jane Knight, adjunct professor at the University of Toronto, we should examine how the Japanese education system's capacity to ‘integrate an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of education’ has evolved. Educational internationalisation is therefore a complex, multifactorial process requiring careful quantitative and qualitative assessment. Such a process also cannot be considered independently of national realities and Japanese ‘exceptionalism’, often emphasised by its defenders.

On this basis, this article revisits just over a century of Japanese higher education and analyses its relationships with its regional and global environment. First, it offers a historical perspective to better understand the changes Japan's education system has undergone and how far current government policies depart from them. Next, we analyse the impact of Japan's various internationalisation policies, highlighting successes and limitations. Finally, we seek to capture Japan's particularity in this field, emphasising the substantial challenge of internationalising Japan without sacrificing the preservation of a ‘Japanese identity’.

Chapter 1: 1868–2000

Gradual internationalisation alternating between openness and withdrawal into national identity



Fukuzawa Yukichi
A major figure of the Meiji era and the beginnings of a genuine Japanese higher education system

Chapter 1: 1868 to 2000

The Meiji and Taisho eras: a Japanese university system born amid growing borrowings from the West and a desire to preserve ‘Japanese exceptionalism’

The beginnings of Japanese higher education can be dated to around 1868, with the establishment of the Meiji government marking the end of almost two centuries of isolationism under the Tokugawa shogunate and its Sakoku policy. As opening to the world appeared the country's only viable choice, many Japanese educators trained in the West and sought to spread its educational model in Japan. Western studies developed alongside this through missionary schools established by Dutch, then British, German and other missionaries. In 1868, Fukuzawa Yukichi, a former official shogunal translator and influential writer, founded Keio Gijuku (which became today's Keio) in Tokyo, offering instruction in several Western languages, including English, which gradually supplanted Dutch. In 1877, the first public university emerged with the foundation of what would become the University of Tokyo. Neither institution, however, yet held university status in the strict sense. Mori Arinori, a particularly influential education minister enjoying the prime minister's unwavering support, made Tokyo the first imperial university by imperial ordinance in 1886. The second imperial university, Kyoto, was not founded until 1897.

Chapter 1: 1868 to 2000

Seven imperial universities were established between 1886 and 1939, including two in Japan's colonies in South Korea and Taiwan. The private university sector, beginning with Keio, also developed at its own pace, with the 1902 ordinance allowing actors other than government to establish higher education institutions. Yet it did not receive official university status until 1918.

As Japanese higher education emerged, however, the West's importance in faculty staffing and in the language and content of courses soon became controversial. Nationalist pressures and the desire to preserve 'Japan's identity' prompted the government gradually to replace Western teachers with Japanese teachers trained in Western techniques, including for foreign-language instruction. As early as 1890, the Imperial Rescript on Education, signed by the new conservative government, reaffirmed Confucian values in schools and more or less openly criticised missionary schools' role. Japan's victories over China and Russia in 1894 and 1905 respectively reinforced this trend, and the Taisho era saw the return of moral instruction in schools and the gradual exclusion of Westerners.

The Showa era: from universities serving the nation to universities serving the market, or the difficult transition from imperialism to neoliberalism

Chapter 1: 1868 to 2000

Thus, despite education's rapid development compared with the Edo period, only one Japanese student in twenty had access to higher education at the start of the Showa era in 1926. State control over education, strengthened from 1890, intensified with imperial Japan's expansionist campaigns. Paradoxically, it was also then that the private sector became dominant, as it remains today.

Yet this was a deeply heterogeneous system, with educational quality varying greatly between imperial universities, second-tier public universities and private universities. The definitive closure of the last missionary schools still run by Westerners further weakened this fragile ecosystem, and educational quality collapsed as students were put to use on battlefields. The trend nevertheless reversed sharply after the war and the establishment of a provisional government under American control in 1946. Despite relative autonomy, the new government opted for a pronounced Americanisation of Japanese education, including a 'single-track system' resembling that still used in most countries today. The challenges were numerous: educational quality had deteriorated profoundly, requiring a university accreditation system to improve oversight. Demand for education was also growing, and the university system was far too small to accommodate it. Indeed, there were already 50,000 students in the country's univer-

Chapter 1: 1868 to 2000

-sities in 1944, compared with only 37,000 in Britain at the same time. Thirty-two additional universities were therefore created between 1945 and 1948 to meet this surging demand. In 1952, there were 71 national universities (including five imperial universities), 116 private universities and 33 public universities. With the baby boom, building universities for everyone remained the major challenge over the following two decades. Mass higher education thus prompted deregulation and a sharp rise in public subsidies, largely benefiting the private sector. Higher education planning also began with an Advisory Committee on Higher Education and a new division attached to the education ministry, the Monbucho.

This planning soon gave way to the new trend dominating the 1980s to 2000: neoliberalism. University entrance selection expanded rapidly, and government subsidies to the private sector were sharply reduced. Nevertheless, private universities continued to boom, with applicant numbers still rising, allowing higher entry fees. Japanese universities then dominated regional rankings, far ahead of China and South Korea. Internationalisation now concerned less the system's structure and teaching quality than how to attract more international students. The Nakasone government therefore marked the moment when Japan, having

Chapter 1: 1868 to 2000

finally caught up with Western powers in this field, had to choose its place on the international stage. It relaxed rules for establishing new universities, promoted strong international development and, in 1983, set an initial target of 100,000 international students per year by 2000. While previous decades had been dominated by fears of being unable to provide university access to all Japanese people who wanted it, gradual demographic change generated entirely different concerns. Authorities feared a rapid fall in demand, potentially affecting higher education's quality and selectivity. This fear gradually materialised as the applicant-to-admitted-student ratio fell from 2 to 1.18 between 1990 and 2008. Developing international mobility towards Japan therefore became a major issue at the new millennium's beginning, and an internationalisation policy reflecting the growing needs created by globalised economic and academic activities appeared necessary.

This first policy proved positive in some respects, and the 100,000 target was reached in 2003, when Japanese universities were at their peak in rankings and exerted strong influence across Asia. Yet the system had vulnerabilities, and Japanese competitiveness soon faced major challenges it still struggles to overcome. What are these challenges, what public policies have addressed them, and with what success?

Chapter 2: Globalisation

Japan facing globalisation: reaffirming Japan's place in the global university market



Yasuhiro Nakasone
Japan's prime minister from 1982 to 1987 and a driving force behind its liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s

Chapter 2: Globalisation

Rankings and international mobility: safeguarding Japan's attractiveness under domestic and international pressures

First, a law deregulating Japanese universities and increasing their autonomy was passed in 2004. National universities were privatised, gaining budgetary autonomy but receiving far fewer government subsidies. Although this measure did not appear directly linked to internationalisation, it significantly affected subsequent policies. Five years later, the Fukuda government set a new target of 300,000 international students annually by 2020, and the Global 30 project was launched in 2009. Thirteen universities were selected, aiming to increase international recruitment sharply, expand English-language courses and international staff, and open new programmes entirely in English to attract non-Japanese-speaking students. Although the selected universities generally welcomed the announcement, enthusiasm soon turned to panic as the programme's budget was cut by 30% in the years after its launch. More broadly, since the 1990s, MEXT subsidies have been conditional on performance targets, particularly student quotas. For many second-tier private universities, excluded by default from elitist policies such as Global 30, recruiting foreign stu-

Chapter 2: Globalisation

-dents became a matter of survival. By the end of the Heisei era, the top thirty private universities received almost 50% of funding, while others depended largely on tuition fees paid by students, still overwhelmingly Japanese. Japan's international mobility policy nevertheless evolved throughout the 2010s. In 2011, the Re-inventing Japan project expanded university partnerships and, for the first time, emphasised sending young Japanese people abroad rather than only attracting foreign students. Japanese-language learning for foreign students in Japan was also more strongly encouraged to ease their entry into the Japanese labour market. In 2012 and 2014, two programmes modelled on Global 30 but covering more universities were launched: Go Global and the TGUP (Top Global University Project). Involving 42 and 37 high-potential universities respectively, they enabled new exchange programmes and helped attract more international students to the country's prestigious institutions.

2019

Year in which the target of 300,000 international students was reached

In 2023, the Kishida government set a new target of 400,000 students by 2033

Thus, in 2019, the target of 300,000 international students was

Chapter 2: Globalisation

reached, just before the Covid-19 crisis. Yet this success needs qualification: 300,000 students actually represented 5% of the global international-student market, itself constantly growing. In other words, Japan's market share remained stable from the early 2000s, while Japanese universities' rankings collapsed, even regionally. The two-speed development system Japan adopted also left its mark. Most international students were concentrated in language schools and low-added-value programmes at mass universities that had lowered selection standards to survive. Quantity thus seems to have overtaken quality, and the nature of the internationalisation challenge has slowly changed in recent years.

Attracting students, yes, but whom, under what conditions and for how long? The difficult transition from quantitative to qualitative internationalisation

As explained above, apart from a few major universities, most international students attend language schools or graduate schools in middle- and lower-tier universities. Among international students studying at Japanese universities, already a minority, only one-third attend the high-potential universities identified by the TGUP, compared with two-thirds at so-called mass universities. Several scandals in some of these

Chapter 2: Globalisation

institutions have raised concerns about programme quality and exposed practices of varying legality intended to attract ever more students. Some universities and language schools appear to be empty shells producing hundreds of illegal workers annually while escaping government scrutiny. Strict measures have since strengthened quality control and restricted violations, but the phenomenon has not disappeared entirely.

To portray the average foreign student in Japan accurately, we must also examine students' nationalities. Although this population has changed somewhat, it remains overwhelmingly Asian: 93.6% of international students came from Asia in 2019, including 40% from China and 23.5% from Vietnam. Within this 93.6%, Chinese and Korean students' shares have declined or stabilised, while the proportion from South Asia has grown steadily. Finally, international students remain a small minority in Japan, comprising only 5.2% of students in May 2020. This characteristic often extends to faculty, only 4.3% of whom were non-Japanese in 2016. Students therefore generally feel marginalised, a situation that does not improve when seeking employment in Japan. In response, the government launched several policies to integrate international students more fully into the labour market, with varying success. The Abe government's ‘revitali-

Chapter 2: Globalisation

-sation strategy' since 2016, for example, aims to increase the share of international students pursuing careers in Japan from 30% to 50%. A points-based immigration system for highly skilled foreign professionals was also introduced in 2012, partly addressing the dual problem of recruited students' quality and the many employment barriers facing foreign professionals. Japanese companies, too, are beginning to appreciate the problem. Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has launched several initiatives to internationalise annual recruitment. For example, in 2016 it launched an initiative to 'nurture global talents', distributing grants of one million yen to Japanese students wishing to study abroad. Nevertheless, the cultural barrier remains substantial for both Japanese people and foreigners wishing to work in Japan. Companies' recruitment processes still place too little emphasis on multicultural backgrounds, and recruitment calendars often fit poorly with international mobility. Recruitment frequently begins a year before employment starts and invariably runs alongside the final year of study. Although this produces a very high proportion of students securing jobs before graduation, it poorly serves international students still developing plans to work in Japan and under intense pressure to adapt rapidly to its norms.

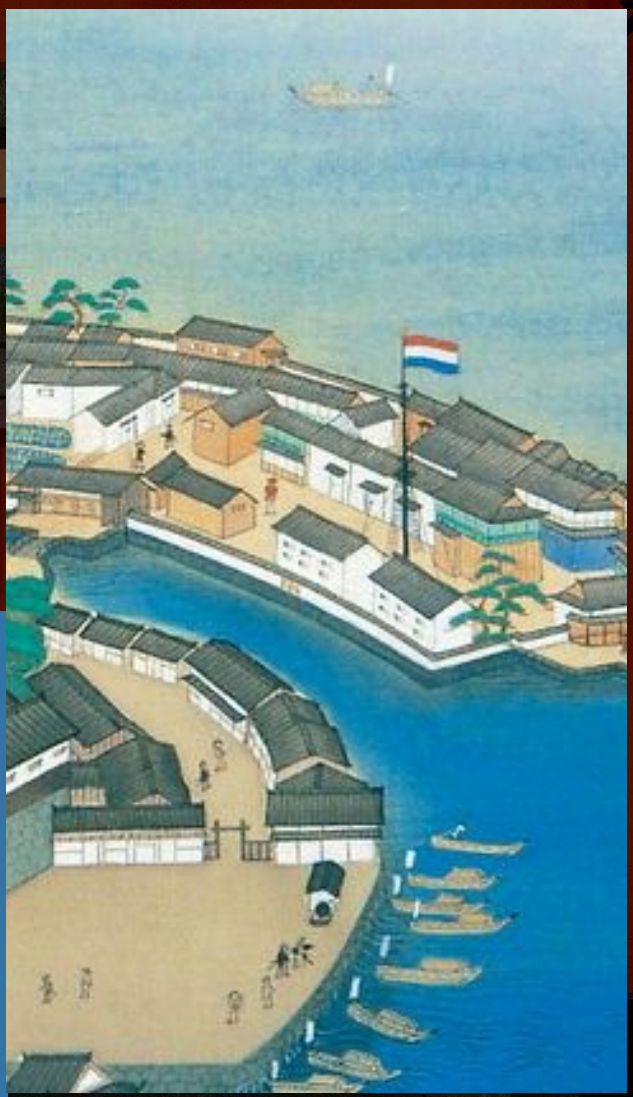
Chapter 2: Globalisation

Moreover, many international students rely on baitos (student jobs) to finance their studies and soon find themselves overwhelmed by final dissertations, time-consuming recruitment processes, language learning and financial needs. Research suffers from a similar problem and is also disadvantaged by a national policy generally unfavourable to pursuing a doctorate, particularly in the humanities.

In summary, beyond substantial investment needs, internationalising Japanese higher education also requires genuine cultural changes to integrate international students better. Yet does this mean entirely erasing Japan's distinctive characteristics, and is it necessarily incompatible with spreading Japanese culture internationally?

Chapter 3: Japan's Challenge

Thinking internationally without neglecting the national dimension



Dejima Island
An emblematic site of the Sakoku policy, symbolising a Japan seeking to maintain international contact without losing its national identity

Chapter 3: Japan's Challenge

Preserving Japanese education, above all in Japanese: responding to English linguistic imperialism and the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon model

At a time when the Anglo-Saxon model has spread widely across the world, including East Asia, thinking about higher education's internationalisation without its Anglicisation seems almost impossible. The language barrier is often cited as the first obstacle to mobility both towards and away from Japan. Japan has therefore invested heavily to compensate for Japanese people's limited foreign-language proficiency and to open up to populations finding Japanese harder to learn. In the early 2000s, Japan was the world's largest English-language education market in absolute terms, with a sector worth almost $20 billion. Through its initiatives, the government also pushed universities to expand English-taught programmes: in 2018, Japanese universities offered almost 55 undergraduate and 23 graduate programmes entirely in English. Yet despite these impressive statistics compared with a few years earlier, this approach has shortcomings. Some Japanese and international students criticised the 'Dejima-isation' caused by these new English-only programmes. Referring to Dejima, the sole island where foreigners were permitted to trade during Sakoku and which remained apart from Japanese society, the term desig-

Chapter 3: Japan's Challenge

-nates the fact that many programmes remain separate from ordinary courses and lack a genuine effort to bring Japanese and international students together. They are often reserved exclusively for international students, who do not always have opportunities to learn Japanese at their host universities or participate in local university life. Cultural exchange thus seems to give way to a quota policy that prevents genuine integration. Hence the Japanese government's recent efforts to develop Japanese courses for foreign students and invest in easing their entry into the Japanese labour market.

However, this problem should not be considered solely from international students' perspective. Although university and school curricula increasingly incorporate language learning, particularly English, at every level, professional and academic life remains overwhelmingly Japanese-speaking. This is partly attributable to Japanese's vitality, an exception compared with other developed Asian countries where English increasingly dominates and has become a marker of elitism. In Japanese academia, particularly the humanities, publications are in Japanese rather than English, explaining Japan's modest ranking for publications in journals affiliated with the Science Citation Index, where English dominates. This

Chapter 3: Japan's Challenge

naturally affects Japan's position in international rankings, which give this indicator considerable weight and pay little attention to the richness of non-English national scientific literatures. The absence of a genuine system of financial incentives for Japanese researchers to publish in international journals also helps sustain this situation.

It is therefore legitimate to consider preserving a rich Japanese-speaking academic and professional ecosystem to build an internationalisation that does not undermine the Japanese model but instead opens it to new perspectives.

Multiculturalism: an international but also a domestic challenge for Japan

The language question, however, is not limited to relations with territories outside the Japanese archipelago. As Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, a University of Tokyo researcher, points out, Japan long refused to consider multiculturalism at home and too often restricted language policy to broadening English teaching. Japan is not as ethnically homogeneous as popular belief suggests: substantial Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese diasporas live there, alongside indigenous peoples such as the Ainu. Several diasporas have established community primary and secondary schools so their children can

Chapter 3: Japan’s Challenge

continue learning their mother tongue alongside Japanese. Yet a 2002 study found that only slightly more than half of Japanese universities accepted students from these community schools. Outside them, opportunities to learn languages other than English or Japanese are very limited, doing little to sustain Japan's remaining cultural richness.

This resistance has also taken other forms, such as the rejection until fairly recently of Kikokushijo, Japanese people who have lived or studied abroad and wish to return. Policies encouraging Japanese universities to accept such applicants were not introduced until 1979. However, this problem is much less pronounced today, partly thanks to government efforts, and Japanese people with real overseas experience are far more valued by Japanese companies than twenty years ago.

IN BRIEF

In conclusion, the internationalisation of Japan's higher education system is a constantly changing process whose manifestations differ greatly across periods in scale, methods and objectives. It often reflects both the incumbent government's policy and the domestic and international pressures Japan faces, and cannot be reduced to a sequence of measures or a simple budgetary problem. Several Japanese newspapers and MEXT reports now speak of Gurobaruka, generally referring to the necessary adaptation of Japan's model to globalisation's constraints. Although globalisation undeniably catalyses internationalisation, it cannot be its sole driver, and merely reacting may prevent Japan from fully benefiting from the richness it offers. Some contrast Gurobaruka with Kokusaika, a concept popular in the past. Although the term has multiple meanings, it is interesting because it sometimes describes a globalisation serving Japan's interests rather than merely responding to its environment. Translating such a concept into concrete policies is far from easy, but keeping it in mind is essential today when considering not only Japan's internationalisation but internationalisation in a Japanese way.

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(MiM 2023)

