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Education Reform in Japan  
in an Era of Internationalization and Risk

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Discussion Paper

**Education Reform in Japan in an Era of Internationalization and Risk**

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**Abstract**

Since the Meiji period, Japanese policy-makers have tried to balance national interest with international concerns. This paper begins by examining the efforts of education reformers from the Meiji period onwards to grapple with the challenges presented by revolutionary changes happening in the world outside Japan. Many policy makers as well as ordinary citizens have wanted and continue to want Japan to promote various kind of international education policy in order to engage productively with the outside world but they do not want the outside world to encroach unduly on Japan's borders. To this end, policies related to internationalization have tried to develop a model of engagement with the outside world that has two prongs. Firstly, foreign elements that enter Japan will be controlled and assimilated and therefore become "Japanese" (examples: university students or staff who must be fluent in Japanese before they are accepted into that institution; foreign nurses who must pass the same exam as Japanese nurses if they want to stay for more than three years). Secondly: foreign elements will be controlled for a limited period and given very limited responsibilities and then required to leave (example: limited-contract language teachers at all levels of the school system). This rigid approach to borders also affects Japanese people: if they leave Japan for too long and spend too long in the risky outside world their "Japaneseness" may become suspect and so this is not encouraged except where absolutely necessary. It can be argued that this attitude gives rise to an overly protective, risk-averse and inward-looking approach to international education policy that is harmful to Japanese students educationally, and is also harmful to Japan's long-term national interests. An OECD report published in 2009 shows that the higher education sector, in particular, is in need of extensive reform to help Japan cope with the forces of globalization.

## 1. Introduction

The Japanese word for “internationalization”, *kokusaika* did not appear in a Japanese dictionary until 1981. It did not take it long, however, to become one of the buzzwords of the decade. In fact, *kokusaika*, was one of the first words learned by the present author shortly after his arrival in Japan in 1989. This can be explained largely because I was an early participant in one of the flagship policies of *kokusaika*, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. Many participants in this programme, coming mostly from the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, were frustrated with what they perceived as the slow pace of internationalization of their Japanese hosts. Many had the impression that “internationalization” really was a new idea in Japan, and that many ordinary Japanese people were unsure about what it meant, and whether or not it was entirely welcome.

Anthropologist David McConnell studied the early years of the JET programme and wisely refused to set out on a “futile quest” for a “true” definition of internationalization, arguing that the over-used word is a social and political construct that has “different associations and meanings for the Japanese hosts than it has for the foreign participants” (McConnell 2000: 3). For many Japanese teachers and officials involved in the programme, especially those in remote towns and villages which had previously had very little contact with the outside world, the mere *presence* of a foreigner in their school and community was a huge step forward. Many young foreign participants in the programme, often from cosmopolitan places like London, Melbourne, New York and Montreal, were more ambitious about internationalization, probably unrealistically so. Their frustration was often compounded by the snail’s pace progress of English language teaching improvement in the schools and local education offices where they were placed.

Frustration with the slow pace of internationalization in Japan may be the reason why some westerners became rather ethnocentric and accused the Japanese government of not being entirely sincere and honest in their efforts to educate children about the world. The present paper will strive to go beyond such ethnocentrism and examine the policy responses made in the field of education to internationalization and globalization. Following McConnell’s example, the “futile quest” for a neat and final definition of these concepts will not be attempted. Instead, the content of policy will be examined, and an external critique of higher education reform by the OECD will be discussed.

## **2. Historical Background**

### **International Education in the Meiji and Taisho Eras**

The Japanese government is always mindful of developments in other advanced nations when it draws up education policy. Government policies on education often begin with a statement about the contemporary international situation – a situation that forms the backdrop against which policy is drawn up. There is nothing new about this. The key people involved in educational policy and discourse in the Meiji and Taisho eras were very influenced by European and American ideas on education.

In fact, during the period running from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid 1920s proponents of liberal and international education enjoyed a brief honeymoon. Four of these key people, were Noguchi Entarô, Sawayanagi Masatarô, Shimonaka Yasaburô and Harada Minoru. Although they had diverse careers all of these influential educators came together in 1922 to establish and take charge of the International Education Society of Japan (Kokusai Kyôiku Kyôkai). This society took an active part in the World Conference on Education held in San Francisco in 1923. Sawayanagi emerged from this conference as the chief spokesperson for international education in Japan. He went on to promote peace, humanitarianism and internationalism at other international events and conferences until his sudden death in 1927. Historian Mark Lincicome notes, however, that “historians question the motives behind Sawayanagi’s peripatetic globetrotting activities as the face of Cosmopolitan Japan abroad” (Lincicome 2009: 65), and accuse him of just being a PR man for imperial Japan. Lincicome defended Sawayanagi by analyzing the sometimes subtle revisions he made to a series of middle school ethics textbooks that he authored between 1909 and 1923, showing that the internationalist message of these books echoed the speeches and papers delivered by Sawayanagi to an international audience.

Even when Japan embarked on a period of aggressive imperialist expansion, this internationalist doctrine was not a total break from its liberal predecessor and in some ways resembled the doctrines of “liberal” powers like Britain and America. Like them it advocated a program of educational and cultural enlightenment, designed by the most advanced countries and imposed upon the least advanced. It parted company with the west, however, in rejecting notions of international law in favor of Japan’s own divinely sanctioned “Imperial Way.” The leading Japanese internationalist educators mentioned

above modified their views according to the new doctrine. This was because contradictions between the “liberal” and the “imperialist” parts of their thought had always been there. During the Taishô democracy period they may have argued against excessive militarism and statism, but they never challenged the notion that sovereignty rested with the emperor. Once the Asia-Pacific War was underway they argued that the war was a historic necessity that could achieve the aims that they had lobbied for, without success, during the brief peace that followed World War I. They blamed the racist and imperialist Western powers for the failure of that peace. In the prewar period, therefore, advocates of international education had no problem with reconciling internationalist virtue with hard-headed notions of national interest. In this they had a lot in common with colleagues working in education in Western imperial nations.

### **Postwar Peace and Nakasone’s Rinkyôshin**

Defeat in World War II spelled the end of Japan’s imperialist ambitions. This was followed by a period when Japanese people channeled their energies into economic success in the global arena. By the 1980s many Japanese leaders thought it was time to put the past behind them and forge a new role for Japan in the world. The most important of these was Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro who set up a special *ad hoc* council on education reform (Rinkyôshin) to conduct a thorough review of all aspects of education policy. Although the council attracted a lot of controversy, one area of reform that gained the support of all involved was the call for education to be “internationalized” (Schoppa 1991: 247-8). There was a general consensus about the need for policies that would help nurture Japanese citizens who can “earn the trust of the international community”. The presumption behind this was that there were sections of the international community that were less than forthcoming with their trust for Japan or its people. Japanese political and business leaders were aware that in international negotiations they sometimes “come across as being ambiguous, hard to understand, untrustworthy or even deceitful” (Yagura 1993:29). This problem became an issue in trade frictions with the United States which became a serious trade and foreign policy problem during the 1980s<sup>ii</sup>. In response it was decided to expand and improve international education. Specifically, the following five categories were marked for reform.

1. The development of Japanese citizens who can live in the international community.
2. Promotion of international exchange and cooperation in education, sports and culture.
3. Promotion of student exchange.

4. Expansion of Japanese language education for foreigners.
5. Improvement of education for Japanese children overseas and children returning from overseas.

It is not difficult to see why this list is not controversial. Similar policies can be found in any economically advanced nation. However, a closer look at official rhetoric and also the content and effect of some of these policies shows that Japan's response to internationalization and globalization does have distinctive characteristics.

### **3. The Outside World Seen from Japan: A Risky and Scary Place**

The Japanese government's international education policy statement in 1992 began with the sentences: "Today, nations in the world are more and more interdependent. If they are to develop together it is necessary that each nation learn about the history, culture, customs and value systems of other nations and strive for mutual understanding"(Ministry of Education 1993: 137). The statement goes on to stress the important role of exchange and co-operation in the fields of education, culture and sports. It recognizes that nation-states are increasingly dependent on one another although they clearly remain separate entities. The 1994 government statement repeats this theme and adds an extra cautionary note about the inherent dangers of the international environment.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War were expected to bring peace and stability to the world. In actuality, however, there have been numerous outbreaks of economic friction and ethnic conflicts. *The international situation surrounding Japan is harsh.*[emphasis added] (Ministry of Education 1995: 193)

This harshness means that Japan must, at the same time that it is striving for 'mutual understanding' with other nations, also "make an active international contribution in keeping with its international status". This phrase is expanded on shortly after by a reference to increased efforts to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of its Official Development Assistance (ODA). Unstated but clearly implied by this kind of language lies the conservative political agenda of promoting Japan as a 'normal' country in the world i.e. one that can have a political and diplomatic international role in keeping with its economic power. Promoting such a policy is not normally the business of education

bureaucrats, but throughout Japan's postwar history conservative efforts to encourage patriotism and revive militarism have had an impact on a very broad range of policy areas, including education. If Japanese children read stories of war heroes like admiral Togo (who defeated the Russian fleet in 1905), then they may be more likely to support a more robust Japanese foreign policy when they grow up. Similarly, if they form an impression, when young, that the world that surrounds Japan is an essentially threatening place then this may also influence their future views of security and defence.

If the outside world is seen as a scary place, then it makes sense to bolster the nation's defences at every level. The nation's borders must be defended not only from potential military or terrorist threats. Educational sociologists, Kariya Takehiko and Jeremy Rappleye (2010) use the terms *permiology and immunology* to analyze Japan's response to globalization in the field of education. In Japan, as in other nations there is a "highly selective opening to the 'world'; *permeability* conditioned by and subordinate to internal policy discourses and influence from abroad 'framed' according to domestic political proclivities." (p.45). The nationalism of Japan's ruling elites in the political world, bureaucracy and business caused the dominant response to the challenges of globalization to be one of defending Japanese national identity rather than embracing cosmopolitanism. This has been shown in the policies to make compulsory an increase in respect for the national flag and anthem, and by nationalist language in the revised Fundamental Law of Education of 2006. Kariya and Rappleye comment on this as follows.

Rather than 'imagining' say, what changes Japanese society would need to undergo to transform itself into a place to welcome immigrants or attract the best and brightest students and scholars worldwide, the discourse on educational reform has been largely dominated by a belief in the need to strengthen Japanese identity and love of country. Operating under the surface usage of the term 'internationalization' we find not the anticipated *permeability* but an *immune* response along Japan's cultural-cum-political borders. (*ibid.*)

#### **4. The Ministry of Education and the Defence of Japanese Culture and Identity**

How does this fear of the outside world square with the very active international activity of many state or quasi-state agencies? The Japanese government cooperates with non-government agencies and international organisations to sponsor and encourage a

wide variety of exchange programmes in various artistic, educational and sporting fields. The Agency for Cultural Affairs (an agency under the wing of the Ministry of Education) is responsible for the “promotion of International Artistic and Cultural Activities”. It is made clear that one of the aims of this activity is “taking Japan’s traditional cultural activities into the international arena”(MOE 1995: 197). One of the consistent themes in Japanese government policies on internationalization is the perceived need to improve Japan’s ability to promote itself in the international arena. Japan, it is argued, needs to present a better case for itself in the court of world opinion. One Japanese commentator has made the following point.

“When [Japanese] businesspeople go abroad, they are often asked about such aspects of Japanese culture as traditional performing arts, Zen Buddhism, *ikebana* flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony, but few are able to satisfy the questioner’s curiosity. This is embarrassing. It suggests that our educational system is not teaching students enough about the fundamentals of Japanese tradition. When people go out in the world, they should have a ‘Japanese face’ they can show to others.” (Yagura 1993: 29)

In this way government policies in the area of foreign language education and the promotion of national cultural events can be seen to be connected. The perceived problem is that Japanese people when they talk to foreigners are letting themselves and their country down in two main ways: they are failing to communicate effectively and clearly; and they are failing to present the proper ‘Japanese face’ to the outside world. Government policies in Internationalization are designed to deal with this problem by, on the one hand, improving language teaching and, on the other, promoting the international dissemination of Japanese ‘culture’. The meaning of culture here – referring as it does to traditional arts and crafts - is highly conservative. Furthermore, it is clear from the policy statements that there can be no confusion between domestic, *Japanese* culture and *foreign* culture. There is a clear line between the two. Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku, in his study of Japanese corporate inter-cultural communication manuals found that one of the clear messages of the manuals was that Japanese businessmen must recognize “Japanese peculiarities” before they try to communicate with foreigners. He found that manuals whose intention was to promote inter-cultural understanding actually had the “unintended consequence of strengthening cultural nationalism” (Yoshino 1999: 23).



Another of the main purposes of government Internationalization policy is to help Japanese people to properly inform foreigners about Japanese culture. In order to do this there must be an officially sanctioned definition of what Japanese culture actually *is*. The hope is that this will help preserve Japan's identity in a potentially threatening international environment. The preservation of Japan's cultural identity also involves nationalist policies aimed at fostering pride in one's own nation. The enforcement of the singing of the national anthem and the hoisting of the national flag at school ceremonies can be seen as an example of this policy (Aspinall and Cave 2001). In other words, through the logic of its approach to internationalization, the Ministry of Education is able to present nationalistic policies as part of an internationalization package. As we saw from the survey of Meiji and Taisho era policy, this is not a new approach for Japan, nor is it distinctive from most other nation states.

It is significant in this context that MEXT's current policy on improving English language ability is entitled "Developing a strategic plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities.'" The unwritten impression there is that Japanese students should learn to be good at English but never forget that they are *Japanese*. The challenge for those nationalists who recognize that Japan's security and prosperity depend on having more people who can communicate better in English remains how to achieve this without diluting or undermining the cultural identity of those who become so proficient in the language of the "other." The challenge for education policy-makers is how to put in place mechanisms whereby Japanese students can become good at English while still remaining "immune" to deeper cultural contagion. The best way to become proficient at a foreign language is to spend time in an environment where that language is the normal medium for communication. However, for Japanese nationalists and policy-makers there are serious risks involved with allowing impressionable young minds to spend too long outside the protection of the mother country. Goodman (1993) has shown how special schools were designated to receive *kikokushijo* i.e. Japanese children who had spent significant time abroad and were now returning to Japan to complete their education. Policy makers believed that these children needed special attention to help them re-adapt to Japanese society. Some critics saw these schools as kinds of de-contamination chambers. Returnee children must not be allowed to contaminate other children with foreign habits and ideas. This attitude, which is usually shared by the culture of the classroom as well as policy-makers, can result in the wasting of scarce foreign language talent. The conformist culture of the Japanese classroom often results

in returnee students with a good command of English disguising their ability and faking a strong Japanese accent in order not to stand out from their peers.

Nationalist ideology and related cultural norms do not only cause problems for returnees. Children who are born of foreign parents or marriages where one parent is foreign also have trouble. Kariya and Rappleye refer to this as “a de-facto policy of ‘assimilation’ and a sink-or-swim approach buttressed by the ‘imagined’ political discourse of the need for a greater appreciation of ‘Japanese-ness’ and Japanese customs.” (2010: 53-4). Children of Brazilian parents in particular have suffered from lack of adequate educational provision. Similar issues have come to light in government efforts to recruit Indonesian and Filipino nurses to help counter staff shortages in the hard-pressed health system. After three years of working in hospitals as “trainees” (with usually the same work load as regular employees) foreign nurses are required to sit the same nursing qualification exam as Japanese nurses. In February 2010, only three foreign nurses passed out of the 254 who took the exam (*Japan Times*, May 11, 2010). The amazing thing is that anybody passed at all given that the nurses have to study Japanese language at the same time as doing the difficult and demanding work required of their profession. The three candidates who passed must have been exceptional people to have mastered such a difficult language while simultaneously learning all the technical terms required for the test, and all the while doing a difficult and stressful job. The 251 foreign nurses who failed the exam were all sent home since the rules only allow them one chance to pass. As with the school system, foreign newcomers are expected to assimilate themselves perfectly into the system or face permanent exclusion. This is Japan’s immune response at work.

Public policy that requires foreign workers to become fluent in Japanese and returnee children to shed the habits of learning they may have picked up abroad helps to create an atmosphere within Japan that is hardly conducive to foreign language learning. I have written elsewhere about how the culture of learning and teaching in Japan inhibits the development of effective methods of communicative language acquisition (Aspinall 2006). Given this state of affairs and the unwillingness of those with power in the education system to do anything about it, Language can be and is used, effectively, as another method of buttressing Japan’s defences against the outside world. In this respect Japan is distinctive from most comparable nations. The educational bureaucracies of China and South Korea, for example, are far more positive about encouraging their citizens to master communicative English at a high level. They do not share the

Japanese fear that if their citizens become too good at a foreign language or spend too long outside their domestic culture they will lose their national identity.

## **5. Higher Education Reform: Japan's need for more world class universities**

The education sector in most modern states that is most open to international exposure is the tertiary sector. During Japan's economic miracle, Japanese manufacturing companies came to dominate many parts of the global economy. The same was not true of Japanese universities which mostly remained inward-looking and domestically oriented. An OECD report published in 2009 (Newby et al 2009) was critical of the lack of an international dimension to many aspects of university life in Japan. The following sections of this paper will consider the findings of this report.

### **The need for a more dynamic tertiary education sector**

Even when the Japanese education system as a whole was drawing praise from foreign observers, universities and most other institutions of tertiary education were not included in that praise. The popular view was that most students worked very hard to get into university, took a four year holiday once there, and then returned to the world of hard work when they graduated. The main function of universities was to provide a sorting mechanism for young people, preparing them for their future role in the workforce. In educational terms, the main function of the university was to help guide young people into full adulthood, a process in which club activity, social life and part-time employment, was just as important (if not more so) than academic study. Many professors saw their educational role as providing guidance for young people on the path to adulthood rather than the developing of intellectual skills or scholarly ability *per se* (Poole 2010). This system functioned well when Japan's major corporations required incoming employees to be "blank slates" onto which the company would imprint its own culture, values and training. The lifetime employment system meant that it made sense for companies to invest time and money into young employees: there was no danger that they would depart mid-career taking their expertise with them. Companies also preferred to do R&D in-house rather than linking up with university research departments. This posture of the main corporations in Japan robbed the universities of some of their main functions. This state of affairs led some critics of the Japanese university system to describe universities as just going through the motions and carrying out "simulated" teaching and research (McVeigh 2002).

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse whether or not criticisms like those of McVeigh are fair. Whatever the real strengths or weaknesses of Japan' universities during the period of postwar economic expansion, it is clear that the economic decline of the 1990s forced a reappraisal of their function. The 2004 reforms were due to a consensus among many politicians and education bureaucrats that serious change of the higher education sector was overdue. The OECD report sums up the situation as follows.

There is a widespread demand that the tertiary education system become, via the modernization agenda embedded in the reforms, more responsive, more agile, more globally competitive and accompanied by higher standards and higher quality all round

Even defenders of the pre-2004 system will concede that the above list of demands pose serious challenges for the system. The word "agile" for example does not normally spring to mind when one considers the typical national university in Japan.

### **The 2004 'Big Bang'**

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004 Japan's national universities were turned into independent agencies. (Details of this change can be found in Goodman 2005).

The 2009 OECD report had the following to say about the Big Bang reforms.

1. Overall, they represent a "necessary but not sufficient condition for the Japanese tertiary system to become internationally competitive" (pp 18-19)
2. The purpose of the reforms was to "knock the national universities out of their complacency and inertia."(p. 19). This has been achieved but there are still powerful "cultural forces within the academic community" that could render the changes temporary unless they are embedded within the universities' own structures and management.
3. National universities have been granted greater autonomy. They have more freedom than before in setting budgets. However, there are still many areas where MEXT has control (e.g. the number so students attending the university) or where the freedoms universities have are very limited (e.g. reallocating resources). There are other areas where MEXT have allowed some autonomy but where universities have refused to exercise it, e.g with regard to raising or lowering student fees. National universities continue to look anxiously around to what other universities are doing before they make big decisions: the herd instinct is alive and well.

4. Changes in the role of MEXT: see next section

### **Confusion about the role of MEXT**

According to the OECD report, if national universities are properly to become autonomous institutions, then MEXT needs to change its role to that of a “steering body” (p 19) Successful steering requires to following three things

1. The capacity to articulate a vision for the system
2. Policy instruments to implement this vision
3. A way of monitoring performance

“In our view . . . MEXT has endeavoured to develop the first and second of these capacities but both remain incipient.” (p. 20) The OECD report was not satisfied that MEXT had articulated a vision of a tertiary *system* as such. It regards individual policy instruments like the ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Centres of Excellence Programme’ as *not* connected to a wider vision of the system.

### **The Lack of top academic management skill**

According to the OECD report, “Japanese universities do not yet have a pool of academic administrators with extensive management and financial experience to take on the strategic management of more autonomous and entrepreneurial university institutions” (Newby et al, 2009: 20). It adds: “There is a huge staff development requirement here, one which the reforms seem to have seriously underestimated.” (*ibid*: 33). Clearly a lack of experienced and qualified managers will have potentially serious consequences for institutions of higher education in Japan if they are presented with changes in the external environment that require more than a minimal response. The medium term prognosis posits social, political, economic and international change that will require more than incremental change if Japan’s universities are to flourish.

## **6. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan as a “Risk Society”**

One approach to the study of advanced, post-industrial societies like Japan is provided by the “Risk Society” paradigm. A recent article by Glenn Hook discussed the application of this paradigm to present day Japan. This is welcome, since up until very recently the non-economic application of risk theory has been confined almost exclusively to Western Europe. Within the “Risk Society” paradigm, Hook identifies three distinct approaches that he wants to apply to Japan. (Hook 2010: 139-142). These are not mutually exclusive approaches.

1. The approach developed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) which conceptualizes risk as being embedded in late modernity, with modern-day “risk-society” subject to a range of dangers and harms arising as an unexpected consequence of our way of life.
2. An approach to risk inspired by Michel Foucault’s idea of “governmentality.” This is less concerned with risk *per se* and more concerned with what is done in the “name of risk,” i.e. how state, market and societal actors govern risk-related problems in a historically contingent environment.
3. An approach that identifies risk as something to be identified, managed and controlled. This approach has roots in the long-standing historical trend of viewing a range of social problems in terms of “spreading risks.”

### **Japanese national universities as public sector bureaucracies and the process of privatization: wariness about increased risks**

Japanese public-sector bureaucratic institutions are one of the products of modernity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were created based mainly on French and German models. They were attractive places for employment because they offered secure jobs with health and pension benefits. In the late twentieth century, these institutions were criticized for putting the interests of their employees ahead of the interests of the sections of society they were supposed to serve. Neo-liberal reformers of the 1980s, like Thatcher, Reagan and Nakasone proposed privatization as a means of opening up these institutions to market forces – which would force them to address the needs of those they serve (people who now came to be characterized as consumers). The winds of privatization did not come to Japanese national and public universities until quite late in the day (although privatization was discussed by Nakasone’s ad hoc council on education in the 1980s). It is not surprising, therefore, that the habits of management and administration, as well as the expectations of the employees are totally unsuited to the demands of the market place.

The language of the “risk society” paradigm is well suited to analyzing the stage of development Japanese national and public universities are now in because it not only helps throw light on the practical problems of transition to a new market-based model of higher education provision, but it can also help in understanding the cultural and even psychological problems faced by employees of institutions that were once shielded as much as possible from the risks and uncertainties of the outside world that only now are being exposed to the winds of market competition. Like other citizens of societies at the

stage of late-modernity, the employees of Japan's national and public universities now have to contemplate a future of more risk and less security than they have enjoyed in the past. They have to worry whether their pensions will keep them secure in their old age. They have to worry about increasing contributions to health and pension plans, and they need to seriously consider taking out private health insurance to cover the shortfalls of the national system. There is now a risk that they will not automatically proceed up the professional ladder as their predecessors did. In the future there is even the possibility they many have to worry about the security of their job itself. Academic members of staff have to worry about the possibility that their teaching and research may, for the first time, become subject to evaluation by outside bodies. Students have to face the risk that even with a degree from a prestigious national university, that fact alone may not guarantee them a comfortable job for life upon graduation.

According to neo-liberal theory this removal of security (some would call it complacency) should inject a spark of dynamism into the tired old dinosaurs of the public sector. Strict Thatcherites would add that if the institutions can not thrive in a competitive space then they should be allowed to fail and go bankrupt. Society as whole would be better off without such "deadwood" or "lame ducks." The risk of failure is a powerful motivational force even as it spreads fear in those who are unaccustomed in having to face it. Punishment for failure and rewards for success would help create a dynamic university sector.

### **"Dynamism without risk"**

This brings us to the part of the OECD report that talks explicitly about risk. The report writers state that "while the government wishes to introduce increasing dynamism into the sector, it also (especially MEXT) wishes to see dynamism without risk." (Newby et al 2009: 27). MEXT understands the universities well enough to know that if there is a feeling of risk then the result will be exactly the opposite of dynamism. University managers will be too frightened to do any more than protect what they have and minimize losses brought about by government cuts. The writers of the OECD report also spotted this danger and noted that "many [national universities] are adopting a more risk averse, conservative approach, mindful that their high status in Japanese society will (they hope) carry them through." (*ibid*). The OECD report asks whether a dynamic system can be created without the possibility of toady's winners being tomorrow's losers.

In order to encourage more dynamism, MEXT has been adopting the approach of offering more research money to universities and departments that pursue policies that the ministry considers to be sufficiently dynamic. One example of this is the “Global 30” scheme that will provide financial rewards to universities that increase the number of international students and faculty members and engage in other international activities. Both MEXT and the OECD are fully aware that in the absence of such incentives national universities and most private universities will fall seriously short of the goal of providing a stimulating cosmopolitan atmosphere for students and faculty alike. For example, the share of non-Japanese among academic staff of Japanese universities slightly decreased from 3.5 percent in 2007 to 3.4 percent in 2008 (Yonezawa 2010: 132). When it is noted that most of these staff are employed in special “native speaker” positions to teach the language and culture of their own country or region, then the serious absence of non-Japanese input into Japanese academia becomes even more apparent.

Almost all Japanese institutions of higher education are extremely protectionist when it comes to employing non-Japanese members of staff, although there are isolated cases of small improvements. MEXT, the OECD and the international organizations that rank universities, all require Japanese universities to employ more non-Japanese staff and accept more international students. Because it is fully aware of the protectionism and conservatism of Japanese university faculties, MEXT hopes that re-distribution of research funding, like the global 30 programme, will provide both the carrot and the stick to force universities to be more cosmopolitan and more dynamic. MEXT’s approach, however, is high risk because its insistence on maintaining so much regulatory control over universities is counter to its other stated goal of encouraging more autonomy and entrepreneurialism in university management.

At the start of the 21st century, the main challenge for Japanese universities, both collectively and individually is how to respond in a positive way to the risks and opportunities presented by globalization. Not the least of the problems facing them is financial. As Yonezawa states, “they have to obtain global recognition but rely almost completely on domestic sources of income” (Yonezawa 2010: 130). In spite of the very high standing of Japanese scientific and engineering research in the world, only a tiny amount of money comes the way of Japanese university researchers from foreign companies: in 2008 only 172 out of 15,000 joint research projects were with foreign companies (Hatakenaka 2010: 113). Given Japan’s economic stagnation over the past



two decades and the prognosis of further decline in the medium and long term, this failure to attract foreign investment is a serious handicap for Japanese university research.

Facing up to the certainty of future domestic economic and demographic decline must surely force university management to engage more with the world outside Japan in order to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. When this is seen in the context of clear global trends of the internationalization of higher education everywhere, there would seem to be no alternative but for the strategic direction of Japanese universities to be in a cosmopolitan direction. The institutional conservatism and protectionism of Japanese universities (especially those nurtured under the protection of the state), however, create serious impediments to the kind of dynamic management that is called for. To date, very few institutions have shown any sign of attempting a dynamic engagement with the world outside Japan. The fact that, even with all the carrots on offer, only thirteen universities responded to MEXT's initial call for the creation of a "Global 30" is symptomatic of this problem. Too many institutions are content with "the orderly management of decline" and there are more than a few in the private sector that are in a state of denial about the seriousness of the problems facing them (mostly brought about by a decline in the population of student-age Japanese).

Risk aversion causes too many academic and administrative staff members to concentrate on self protection and minimizing their own losses. The literature on risk shows that it does not have to be treated in such a negative and pessimistic way. Taking risks is, of course, at the heart of entrepreneurialism. The employees of Japanese institutions of higher education, however, have been nurtured in an environment that has shielded them from the economic risks employees in other organizations have had to face. (Indeed, this may have been one of the motivations for seeking employment in the university sector in the first place.) But institutional conservatism is only one part of the picture. Employees of individual institutions are also citizens of the state, and there is abundant evidence that state actors have consistently promoted the view to the Japanese public that foreigners and the world outside Japan are things to be wary of. This can be seen, for example, in the response to the threat of terrorism after 9/11 (Leheny 2010). Given the lack of experience most Japanese people have in dealing with non-Japanese, and given their generally poor ability at foreign languages, the public atmosphere of distrust of foreigners (fuelled for example by regular police reports that foreigners are responsible for rising crime rates) has not diminished.

Conservatism and protectionism combined with a wariness of foreigners make it difficult for those members of universities who want to encourage cosmopolitanism to overcome the objections of colleagues who are opposed. Given the need for consensus in the decision-making processes in many Japanese universities (particularly national ones) it is very difficult for those who want more openness to foreign students or members of staff to get their way. The authors of the OECD report also spotted this problem. “In practice the professors’ councils [*kyoujukai*] has huge powers of veto, without being responsible for the financial and strategic consequences of their decisions” (Newby et al 2009: 32). They went on to note that “the systems of checks and balances tended to operate in a reactive, even negative way, rather than in a positive and pro-active manor” (*ibid.*) It is hard to see how a system that works like this can become “dynamic” without serious overhaul.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Japanese state education system was created in the first place by learning from abroad. This ability to learn from foreign models and apply modified aspects of them to the domestic situation has not gone away. One of the positive points noted by the OECD team was an “eagerness to learn” from foreign ways of doing things (Newby et al 2009: 93). The team that drew up the 2009 report was made up of academics with a background in the English, American and North European education systems. In their report they applied their own views on higher education reform to the case of Japan which – at least in the rhetoric of MEXT – is highly influenced by such a world view. However, Japan, as an independent nation, is under no obligation to follow this model of reform.

Do Japanese universities *have* to open themselves up to more risks in the name of increased dynamism and cosmopolitanism? The question here is what are the alternatives? Different institutions have different needs. There are many universities in Japan that provide a good service to their surrounding community by selecting and socializing young people for productive employment in local jobs. (These institutions are similar to community colleges in the USA.) Demanding that these institutions become more dynamic, entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan seems quite unrealistic given their circumstances and resources. For any university that claims any kind of global standing, however, the default strategy of ‘carrying on regardless’ does not seem viable.

With a shrinking native population and a stagnant economy, world-class Japanese universities (along with those that have serious ambitions to join their number) have no choice but to engage more with the global academic and research community. This act alone would require dynamism from university management. The OECD team found that this kind of management was lacking during their field trip to Japan. Japanese institutions, however, have surprised western observers before in their ability to adapt and learn from the outside world.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> In 1988 the Bush Administration named Japan as an “unfair trader” under the Super 301 trade legislation. During protests in Detroit Japanese cars were smashed with sledgehammers.