

Chapter 3

Higher Education in Japan: Its Uniqueness and Historical Development



Hideto Fukudome

3.1 Introduction

Japan has one of the largest higher education systems in the world. Today, about 80% of Japanese 18-year-olds proceed to various types of higher education institutions after they graduate from high school. About 60% of them enter four-year and two-year colleges and universities, and about 20% enroll in the nonuniversity sector, that is, technical and vocational training colleges and technology colleges without degree-granting status. Some countries have larger percentages of students who enroll in higher education than Japan; however, given Japan's relatively larger population, its higher education system matriculates a larger number of students. The percentage of high-school graduates advancing to higher education has rapidly increased over the past 20 years, and most young people have had access to some kind of higher education in recent years (MEXT 2017). Japan has built one of the most well-structured higher education systems in the world, indicating a "massified" democratized higher education system, of which we should be proud. However, this massive system is not usually seen as a major indicator of the success of the Japanese higher education system. Despite the attainment of this large-scale democratic educational system, higher education has experienced some major issues in terms of quality.

In this chapter, I will discuss the uniqueness and development of Japanese higher education mainly from a historical perspective. The development can be discussed in four main stages: beginning and early development in the prewar era, drastic change in the postwar era, the period of expansion and disorder during the economic growth of society between the 1960s and 1980s, and the post-1990s period of reforms.

H. Fukudome (✉)

Graduate School of Education, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan
e-mail: fukudome@p.u-tokyo.ac.jp

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2019

Y. Kitamura et al. (eds.), *Education in Japan*, Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects 47,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2632-5_3

3.2 Uniqueness of the Japanese Higher Education System

Before discussing the historical development of Japanese higher education, elaborating on some of its basic characteristics would be insightful. One of the unique features of the Japanese higher education system in terms of the number of institutions and undergraduate students is its huge private sector. This is a common distinction among higher education systems in major Asian countries compared with those in Europe and the United States (Altbach and Umakoshi 2004). The Japanese higher education system's public sector is divided into two types: national universities supported by the national government and local public universities funded by local governments such as prefectures or cities. According to 2017 statistics, the college and university sector accounts for 780 institutions in total, 604 (77%) of which are private. In terms of the number of four-year undergraduate students, 2,007,207 (78%) are enrolled in private colleges and universities (MEXT 2017).

In the public sector, there are 86 national universities and 90 local public universities in 2017. The latter slightly outnumber the former but are smaller in size. National universities have approximately 600,000 students including four-year undergraduate students, graduate students, and auditing students—four times the number in local public universities, which have around 150,000 students.

At the graduate level, national universities dominate because they include major research-intensive universities that emphasize academic research and research training at graduate schools. Nearly 60% of graduate students enroll in national universities, with the percentage increasing to 66% when considering only doctoral students (i.e., excluding masters and professional degree students).

The Japanese higher education system was established in the late nineteenth century with the national (at that time, imperial) university sector. After the Second World War, the expansion of higher education was focused on the private sector, which played the major role in the “massification” of higher education. Most large and comprehensive national universities assumed the principal role in providing cutting-edge research and graduate research training, particularly at the doctoral level. And, the local public sector sustained the regional demand for higher education opportunities. This was the basic structure of the Japanese higher education system after the Second World War, which mainly depended on the private sector for undergraduate education opportunities and was financially supported by the private initiatives market, including education providers and students/parents. At the same time, the market was controlled and regulated by the national government. Regulatory control by the national government was another traditional underpinning of the Japanese higher education system.

Burton R. Clark, an eminent higher education researcher in the United States, discussed the higher education system from an international comparative perspective (Clark 1983). In his well-known triangle of decision-making authorities, Clark argued that Japanese higher education was positioned in a strongly market-oriented system. This is partly true because in Japan, both providers and consumers of higher education are composed mainly of private initiatives. However, although almost 80% of higher education opportunities are provided by the private sector, in reality,

the Japanese higher education system depends just as much upon the national government's regulatory initiatives.

In recent decades, particularly after the 1990s, national government's higher education policies have attempted to loosen regulatory control, emphasizing instead market competition among higher education institutions on the one hand and granting considerable autonomy to individual institutions on the other. However, this aim has not exactly translated into reality. On the contrary, in some senses, the higher education system depends more on the national government. Yet, this does not mean that universities are still directly controlled by national government policies as they were until the 1990s. Rather, they are often forced to follow national policy directives to secure financial support from the national government. This means that, for higher education governance, the national government has oversight. Besides, in Japan, the proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) assigned to public subsidy for higher education is the lowest among members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (MEXT 2013). This implies that financially, Japanese higher education depends on private initiatives for providers and consumers of education.

Even though both policy makers and officials in higher education institutions have gradually come to understand the value of autonomous governance in institutions, it has been rather difficult to change the traditionally fostered mentalities of government officials and academicians. The Japanese higher education system has maintained its quality at a minimal level mainly through regulation by the national government.

3.3 Formation of Japanese Higher Education in the Prewar Era: The National Government's Initiative

3.3.1 *Founding of National Universities*

In Japan, few educational institutions existed during the Edo era and earlier ages, some of which provided education substantially equivalent to higher education level (Okubo 1997). However, the foundation of the University of Tokyo in 1877 was an epoch-making event that laid the foundation for Japanese higher education, because the full-fledged university was created by the newly established Meiji government—the national institution overseeing the emerging public education system. The most remarkable attribute of the University of Tokyo at that time was that its principal purpose was the training of personnel who would become essential for building the new nation (Amano 1986).

The University of Tokyo was founded by merging several existing professional training institutions. It was the first higher education institution established by the Ministry of Education. In 1886, the university was renamed the Imperial University according to the Order of Imperial Universities. It was the first comprehensive university with five “branch universities”: law, medicine, engineering, letters, and

sciences (Nakayama 1978). It also held the postgraduate tier (though not exactly a graduate program) and awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1888 for the first time in Japan. In 1897, a second Imperial University was established in Kyoto, and the original Imperial University renamed itself the Imperial University of Tokyo (Ushiogi 1997). After that, other Imperial Universities were founded in major cities. Some of them maintained a policy of increasing the number of comprehensive institutions, whereas others were organized in accordance with local citizens' expectations. Until the founding of Nagoya Imperial University in 1939, Japan had nine Imperial Universities, including two institutions abroad (Keijo Imperial University in Seoul and Taipei Imperial University). Even after the Second World War, seven former Imperial Universities comprised the group of the most active and extensive research universities. They also attracted the most talented high-school students in each regional area. All of them have become national public universities. In summary, the national initiatives implemented during the founding era shaped the modern higher education system in Japan.

3.3.2 Higher Education During the Prewar Period

Initially, lectures at the Imperial University were delivered in foreign languages. At the Imperial University of Tokyo, English, French, and German were used depending on the area of expertise. The most urgent task faced by the university was to *import* scientific knowledge from the nations with the most advanced scholarship. Professors were invited from major foreign universities to teach in their mother tongues, and students were required to assimilate their teachings as quickly and accurately as possible. The most important mission of the Imperial Universities was to introduce state-of-the-art science from advanced nations and train personnel who could contribute to building a new empire attempting to catch up with the advancements of the West (Nakayama 1978).

Old high schools provided basic instruction in foreign languages, and language studies allowed specialized teaching in universities. Old high schools primarily aimed to ensure general education at the higher education level. Therefore, they composed a part of the higher education system. (After the Second World War, high schools were placed at the secondary-education level.) Old high schools also required their applicants to pass competitive entrance examinations, which are almost comparable to modern-day competitive entrance examinations for high-ranking universities. In that sense, old high schools were considered foundations for elite training. They were institutions not only for teaching foreign languages and general education but also for cultivating young students' character through residential living and personal interactions between teachers and students. Old high schools could be compared to Japanese-style liberal arts colleges. Elite people living in the prewar era formed their identities under intimate educational settings provided by old high schools. After the Second World War, the old high-school

system was integrated into a newly established university system, and most aspects of their original environment were lost (Hata 2003).

In 1918, the Ministry of Education issued the University Ordinance. With the economy booming, the Ministry shifted its restrained higher education policy to an expansionary approach. Under the ordinance, some former vocational training schools upgraded their status to university and were bestowed the authority to award academic degrees. By the end of the Second World War, many public and private colleges and universities emerged. In many cases, the conditions of teaching and learning in these institutions were considerably different from those in the Imperial Universities. Particularly, the business operations and teaching methods in private institutions were usually much more economical and without substantive financial support from the national government. However, staying true to their mission and purpose, private institutions worked hard to handle these severe conditions and played important roles in preparing young students for work (Amano 2009a, b). Private institutions played an even more significant role after the Second World War in expanding higher education opportunities. We can find the emergence of the concept of higher education management in these prewar private institutions.

3.4 Development of Higher Education After the Second World War

3.4.1 Drastic Changes in the Higher Education System

Japanese higher education kept its basic structure until the end of the Second World War. Subsequently, under the guidance of the allied occupation forces, the higher education system experienced a drastic change along with the nation itself. A delegation of experts from the American education system thoroughly reviewed the Japanese education system during wartime. Their report indicated that one of the most serious issues in the Japanese education system was the insufficient number of free-thinking, educated people who could oppose the military-led government from exercising its autocracy. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom were carefully discussed even in prewar era (Terasaki 1979). However, before and during the wartime, they were severely restricted on many occasions.

The first report prepared by the delegation emphasized that the old higher education system had largely been exclusively for the privileged classes and that the new system should be more open and democratic, which meant that the system should provide much more learning opportunities for ordinary citizens (The United States Education Mission to Japan 1946). Accordingly, a large number of reformed or newly organized colleges and universities emerged. Most old colleges and universities were handed a renewed status under the School Education Act enacted in 1947. In addition, mergers, upgrades, and/or new constructions led to the establishment of a large number of national public, local public, and private higher education institutions. In the meantime, a new structure for the higher education system was

formulated within 5 years. Most of these newly established institutions were developed from prewar institutions. In that sense, the new higher education system preserved the fundamental attributes of the old system. Postwar higher education owes the prewar system for its underpinnings.

Since the 1950s, the higher education system rapidly expanded in a short period of time. It is plausible to argue that postwar higher education reform succeeded in providing educational opportunities to many citizens. On the other hand, it was difficult to maintain the educational quality of the expanding higher education system, particularly under postwar disorder and unstable socioeconomic conditions.

3.4.2 Adoption of a General Education Curriculum

One of the most fundamental issues for postwar higher education reform was the adoption of a general education curriculum as a requirement for undergraduate studies. During the prewar period, colleges and universities were a type of institution reserved almost exclusively for specialized and/or vocational education, and old high schools and preparatory divisions of universities provided basic instruction in preparation for college studies. After the war, most old high schools were merged into new universities, and high schools were newly established as institutions for the latter part of the secondary-education system. New high schools widely disseminated the provision of education across a broad range of general subjects. This created an issue in the formulation of general education curricula in higher education institutions, which needed to be different from general studies at high schools.

Documents and reports on general education in the United States, including the Harvard Redbook (Harvard University 1945), were widely read in Japan. Japanese academicians involved in discussions on general education visited major universities and liberal arts colleges in the United States. They rigorously studied general education and attempted to understand and adopt its concept and contents for the Japanese context. The basic structure of general education was composed of the distribution requirements of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, along with some foreign language studies, physical education, and, in some cases, interdisciplinary courses. General education proposed that college students should have broad knowledge before they started to study more specific disciplines.

However, this newly conceptualized general education did not very well suit Japanese higher education. Even though general education has become a requirement for undergraduate students in all colleges and universities, both students and faculty members were never satisfied with the real state of affairs. One reason for this was that postwar undergraduate education has still emphasized specialized teaching more than broad studies. In the Japanese system, students usually had already matriculated in specialized schools or colleges in higher education institutions when they were admitted as freshmen. General education was often criticized as a repetition of what students had already learned in high school. Another factor for negative reactions to general education was that the concept of general education

was not considered seriously and that teachers taught their own specialties under the guise of general courses (Kaigo and Terasaki 1969; Osaki 1999).

In 1991, still only less than half a century after general education was adopted, it was removed as part of the official national government's university standards. It ceased to be a series of specific courses, and each institution was required to assume responsibility for organizing courses on broad and basic studies. Following this change, the integration of broad education and specialized education has often been discussed both in the national policy arena and in individual institutions. However, as a national trend, in many institutions, specialized studies have been emphasized over and above broad and basic education (Yoshida 2013). Even though there have been concerted efforts across all institutions to actively implement the concept of general education, the widely shared concept of undergraduate education is still unclear.

3.4.3 Graduate Education Under the New System

Another critical issue in higher education after the war was graduate education. As already briefly described, in Japan graduate schools already existed during the prewar era. The first graduate school was created in the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1886, following a small graduate division that existed as a forerunner to the graduate school for a few years. Prewar graduate schools did not function as training schools for academic researchers. Future researchers often studied abroad in countries such as Germany, England, and the United States after their undergraduate studies. Graduate schools in Imperial Universities had few students, and there were no specific curricula or seminars for research training. Only a limited number of students received doctoral degrees. At that time, awarding doctoral degrees had almost no relevance to graduate work. Candidates could submit their dissertation regardless of their enrollment in graduate programs.

After the war, the graduate school system experienced a drastic change and was transferred to a new system. The American graduate school system served as a model for this shift. Two levels of educational programs were clearly set out: masters programs and doctoral programs. Each program had to have a specific curriculum, with the focus placed on awarding graduate degrees. Students were encouraged to complete a coursework and a dissertation (or thesis). This new system was referred to as "graduate schools with degree programs," in contrast to the prewar tradition. The series of national policies on graduate education since the 1950s have been based upon this idea. The main goals of this new system were as follows: enhancement of the quality and quantity of coursework, improving completion rates of doctoral degrees, and adapting graduates to the needs of labor markets both within and beyond academia. Even though the basic format was derived from the American graduate education system, the organization of Japanese graduate schools has some distinctions (Ichikawa and Kitamura (Eds.) 1995). There have been a limited number of professionally oriented programs, except in engineering. Furthermore,

masters' programs are usually designed as an early phase of a Ph.D. program (Fukudome 2012). In 2003, a new professional school system was passed into national law. In addition, following national policies in recent years, the Japanese graduate education system has attempted to enhance its flexibility and adaptability. Although the system still faces many continuing issues, increasingly unconventional methods are being adopted in graduate programs.

3.5 Expansion and Disorder Under “Massification”

Postwar higher education commenced with many challenges. Japanese higher education has expanded continuously since the establishment of the new system. The enrollment rate of 18-year-olds in four-year and two-year colleges and universities increased to as high as 40% in the mid-1970s. In the prewar period, opportunities for higher education were severely restricted, and only a small percentage of male students could attend college or university. Since the war, higher education enrollment has dramatically increased, and many non-elite and female students have enjoyed access to higher education.

As in other advanced countries, a student movement opposing the “massified” higher education system emerged in Japan in the late 1960s. Students of this period spiritedly attempted to question the rationale of postwar higher education development. Even though the students' activism largely reflected the social and political contexts at that time, students vehemently protested against bureaucratic university administration and the “mass-production” format of college education. Classes and daily operations were suspended in many institutions, and at the University of Tokyo, one of the campuses that encountered severe hostility decided to cancel its entrance examination. Faced with disarray, many universities made proposals to reform their administration and teaching (Osaki 1994). However, after the turbulence was over, most of these proposals were shelved. Although these campus riots were unable to significantly change the approach of higher education institutions, they created sufficient momentum to encourage a group of academicians to start considering higher education from a different standpoint. For example, in 1972, a few years after the turmoil, the Research Institute for Higher Education was founded in Hiroshima University. It was the first stable research organization devoted to the academic study of higher education and contributed to the enhancement of higher education research in later years.

3.6 Post-1990s Reform Era

The Japanese higher education system has continued to expand. By the early 1990s, nearly 60% of 18-year-olds attended higher education, including those who attended vocational training colleges. The system has greatly matured since then, but issues

still exist in many different areas, some of which are inherent in the historical development of Japanese higher education.

Since the 1990s, Japanese higher education has entered an era of reform. The rapid decrease in the youth population in recent decades has had an extremely large impact on higher education reform. The population of 18-year-olds reached its peak in the early 1990s and has rapidly decreased since then. During the last two decades, the number of 18-year-olds has declined by approximately 40%, from about 2 million to 1.2 million. Although the attendance rate in higher education has increased, the number of students has actually decreased from the mid-1990s. Until then, higher education had simply been sustained by the growth of the young generation and their rising attendance rate. Now, higher education institutions have to compete with each other to admit enough students to maintain their business. Institutions can no longer secure their status if they cannot promote their quality and distinctions.

Furthermore, the transition from an industrial society to a knowledge-based society means that people's work and behavior based upon advanced knowledge and skills are becoming increasingly meaningful. Research and development and advanced education in colleges and universities are especially significant for society and the national economy.

Higher education institutions therefore need to adapt to a new environment along with these social changes. Accordingly, in 1991, the national higher education policy changed its approach as the Ministry of Education started to "deregulate" its university standards. It is often claimed by many higher education researchers that this amendment had the largest impact on persuading colleges and universities to independently transform. This policy change served as a wake-up call for the beginning of the reform era. University Council, set up in 1987 in the Ministry of Education as its major advisory board for higher education reform, published a series of reports, some of which had considerable influences on higher education institutions.

3.7 Future Issues for Japanese Higher Education: Sustainability Based on Autonomy

Higher education still faces a myriad of wide-ranging critical issues, including undergraduate education, graduate education and research, community engagement, quality assurance and accreditation, and governance and management. However, I believe that the most significant challenge relates to how higher education institutions can implement their initiatives to address these issues. The trigger for reform was pulled by the national government. The world of higher education, however, has remained passive in almost every aspect. Regardless of nations and cultures, colleges and universities are basically conservative and often resist change. Changes are often externally enforced. Particularly in Japan, government policies have the greatest influence on institutions and compel such institutions to implement reforms.

In more than two decades, autonomous governance and management by higher education institutions has been thought to be critical. However, it is rather difficult to change the mentality of government officials and academicians, both of whom have formulated their traditions over a long period. Governmental control has assured minimum standards of education. At the same time, it has heavily restricted each institution's distinctive development. Compared with elementary and secondary education, Japanese higher education commands relatively low respect internationally. A reason for this is that at the higher education level, the autonomy and uniqueness of institutions are more significant in the dynamic development of the system.

Higher education institutions have gradually and proactively attempted to improve their education and administration. It is all the more critical for the future of Japanese higher education that outcomes of these efforts gradually bear fruition and that they contribute to the creation of a vigorous national higher education system.

References

- Altbach, P. G., & Umakoshi, T. (Eds.). (2004). *Asian universities: Historical perspectives and contemporary challenges*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Amano, I. (1986). *Kouto kyoiku no nihonteki kouzou* [Japanese structure of higher education]. Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press.
- Amano, I. (2009a). *Daigaku no tanjo(jo)* [Emergence of Japanese universities, First volume]. Tokyo: Chuo Koron Publishing.
- Amano, I. (2009b). *Daigaku no tanjo(ge)* [Emergence of Japanese universities, Second volume]. Tokyo: Chuo-koron Publishing.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fukudome, H. (2012). Daigakuin kyoiku to kenkyusha yousei: Nichi-bei hikaku no shiten kara [Graduate education and research training: Comparative study on Japan and the U.S.]. *Nagoya Journal of Higher Education*, 12, 237–256.
- Harvard University, Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society. (1945). *General education in a free society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hata, I. (2003). *Kyusei koko monogatari* [Old High schools in Japan]. Tokyo: Bungei Shunju Publishing.
- Ichikawa, S. & Kitamura, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Gendai no daigakuin kyoiku* [Japanese graduate education in modern times]. Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press.
- Kaigo, T. & Terasaki, M. (1969). *Daigaku kyoiku* [University education]. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- MEXT. (2013). *Kyoiku shihyo no kokusai hikaku* [International comparison of indicators of education]. Tokyo: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.
- MEXT. (2017). *Gakkou kihon chosa hokokusho: Koutou kyoiku kikan hen* [Basic school survey report: Higher education institutions]. Tokyo: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.
- Nakayama, S. (1978). *Teikoku daigaku no tanjo* [The birth of the Imperial University of Tokyo]. Tokyo: Chuo Koron.
- Okubo, T. (1997). *Nihon no daigaku* [Universities in Japan]. Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press.

- Osaki, H. (1994). *Daigaku funso wo kataru* [Talking about student unrest in Japanese universities]. Tokyo: Yushindo Kobunsha.
- Osaki, H. (1999). *Daigaku kaikaku: 1945–1999* [University reform in Japan: 1945–1999]. Tokyo: Yuhikaku Publishing.
- Terasaki, M. (1979). *Nihon niokeru daigaku jichi seido no seiritsu* [Establishment of the university autonomy in Japan]. Tokyo: Hyoronsha.
- The United States Education Mission to Japan. (1946). *Report of the United States education mission to Japan* (submitted to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers), Washington: United States Government Printing Office.
- Ushioji, M. (1997). *Kyoto teikoku daigaku no chosen* [Challenges of the Imperial University of Kyoto]. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Yoshida, A. (2013). *Daigaku to kyoyo kyoiku* [Liberal education in universities in post war Japan]. Tokyo: Iwanami Publishing.