

HIGHER EDUCATION  
IN JAPAN: Its Take-off and Crash

by NAGAI MICHIO

translated by JERRY DUSENBURY

UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO PRESS

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Note: All Japanese personal names in this book follow Japanese usage, i.e. family name first.

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## PREFACE

**D**uring my years as a university professor in Japan, I have been preoccupied with the state of higher education in that country. The content of education is meager and research that has gained world recognition is sparse in proportion to the number of institutions and students. Faculties are dominated by academic cliques; planning for research and education is wanting. In short, glaring deficiencies are far too numerous.

In this period I have had the good fortune of traveling in the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, and have observed higher education in these areas. I have also studied in the United States and taught at Columbia and Stanford Universities in that country, at the British University of Hong Kong, and at El Colegio de Mexico. When I compared Japanese universities with those I had seen and worked in abroad, I found the former extremely bad and became more and more convinced of the need to set forth an objective account of the situation. Once this task was begun, however, I became keenly aware of the difficulty of the assignment. Universities are numerous and diverse. Moreover, even a single university has many aspects—the different functions of research, professional education, and general education, the activities of teachers and students as they live in the university, the problems of administration and management, and so forth. To obtain a total grasp of the situation and to attempt to clarify the character of Japanese higher

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education through comparison with universities in other countries—while dealing at the same time with each of these realities—is no easy task.

I am fully aware of my inadequacy in grappling with these questions. Nevertheless, I was prompted to write a study of higher education in Japan because I felt that I wanted to make an initial contribution to the resolution of the present impasse. For this reason, rather than simply collecting a mass of raw data, I have endeavored, through the use of historical and comparative perspectives, to shed some light on the overall character of higher education in Japan.

Part I of the present volume, was written little by little over the course of a year and a half. Although it was longer in preparation than I had originally anticipated, I was fortunately able to spend the greatest portion of my time during this period on problems of the university. As a member of the Faculty Administrative Committee of my own university, Tokyo Institute of Technology, I was called upon to think about the whole university. My participation in the writing of the *Daigaku no Niwa* (The Campuses) series for the *Asahi Janaru* (Asahi Journal) also contributed significantly to a broadening of my knowledge and experience. Despite these opportunities, I am sure that my treatment of some issues is slanted and that I have neglected to deal sufficiently with other important realities. I hope the reader will advise me at these points. At the same time I would like to stress the urgency of university reconstruction.

Part II of this book includes essays I have written during the last twelve years concerning problems of educational development in Japan since 1868. Japan has been described as the only non-Western country to experience modernization and industrialization during a single century. Education undoubtedly played a very important part in this development. However, it has not been easy to establish a modern educational system. There have been successes as well as failures in the course of educational development.

The frame of reference I used in writing the essays, as well as my study of higher education, consists of three theses: (1) The educational development of Japan is a reflection of internal social changes. (2) At the same time it reflects the Japanese response to the impact of

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the West, in finding an educational system suitable to a backward nation. (3) Also apparent in the course of educational development is an attempt to resolve conflicts between traditional and modern cultures. I hope that the reader will examine the usefulness of this framework in studying educational changes in an emerging, non-Western nation like Japan during the last hundred years. Although the achievement of some aspects of educational development in Japan has sometimes been overestimated, I have tried to point out both positive and negative aspects.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the many persons who helped in the course of preparation of this book. Part I and two of the essays in Part II were translated by Mr. Jerry Dusenbury. My former associates at Tokyo Institute of Technology, Professor Yamamura Kemmei of Saitama University, and Mr. Yamagishi Shunsuke helped me in preparing the original Japanese text of Part I. Those who gave me valuable suggestions and advice regarding the essays in Part II are mentioned at appropriate places in the essays. For the preparation of the English edition, I am indebted to Mr. Minowa Shigeo of the University of Tokyo Press.

Nagai Michio

Tokyo, Japan  
January 1971

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Part I.  
University and  
Society in Modern  
Japan





# 1. THE PRESENT STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Crisis in the Midst of Prosperity

Japan now boasts one of the world's most flourishing higher education industries. According to a Ministry of Education report for 1969, there are now 379 four-year institutions, with an enrollment of 1,355,000 students, and an additional 473 junior colleges (*tanki daigaku*), with 263,000 students. Altogether there are 852 institutions of higher education with a student population of 1,618,000. In terms of these figures, only the United States, with 2,230 institutions and 5,526,000 students (in 1963), the Soviet Union, with 1,600 institutions and 3,860,000 students (1965), and India, with 2,300,000 students (1967), rank above Japan.<sup>1</sup>

These seemingly auspicious figures, however, cannot conceal the fact that higher education in Japan today is facing the most serious crisis in its history. The crisis becomes obvious as soon as one begins to raise fundamental questions about the nature of the university. When faced with the simple question "What is the university?" most people are unable to make an immediate reply, and the answers that finally emerge are varied and inconclusive. One person insists that the mission of the university is still the "search for truth," but another questions whether the more than one million young men and women who crowd the universities today are really engaged in

1. *Gakkō kihon chōsa hōkokusho* (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1969).

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such a lofty pursuit. For him, the university is an institution concerned with “professional education.” He may even speak of it as a “training center” for white-collar workers. A third person feels that these two descriptions of the university do not exhaust its functions. He points to the existence of compulsory general education in the postwar university as proof of his contention that the university should be dedicated to the “liberal ideal” and should foster the growth of the human personality.

If we approach this problem more specifically and limit our question to the nature of the “new-system” university which came into existence after World War II, the response is much the same. Although the new-system university can be negatively defined as “different from” the “old-system” university, the positive significance of postwar educational reforms is not always clear. Let us then, for the time being, put aside any general discussion of the contemporary university and think concretely about the particular universities to which we are, or have been, related. Why do we go to the university every day? In what tasks are we engaged as university teachers and students? Unhappily, these questions also elicit no clear answer. In the midst of the confusion that reigns throughout our campuses, neither teacher nor student dares to become fully involved in the life of the university. Many students are content merely to maintain their status as students, and more than a few teachers regard the university as a short-term training institute at which they have been “invited” to lecture. Thus the large number of students and institutions of higher education masks internal degeneration. Caught in the trap of success, universities await the future robed in the garments of external prosperity. This is the crisis in higher education.

At this point, some readers may wish to question this portrayal of the Japanese situation, considering it unduly alarmist. By way of retort, they may suggest that the contemporary crisis in higher education is a world wide phenomenon. From my observations, however, the conditions I have been describing are peculiar to contemporary Japan. The fact is that today Japan suffers both from a lack of conceptual clarity about the nature and purposes of the university and from the hollow and desultory character of the education it offers.

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It is not difficult to substantiate this contention. If one examines the financial statements of all private universities, he will find that in 1963 only ¥8 billion (\$242,777,777) was allotted for what can be considered pure research funds. Moreover, the student-teacher ratio in private universities is 29:1 (as compared with 8:1 in national universities). Overworked in the classroom, the teacher has neither time nor funds for substantial research. Even if he gives his undivided attention to the crucial task of education, he faces an impossible situation. Although the number of students to be admitted in 1969 was officially set at 148,780, in actual practice 256,977 students, or 1.7 times the fixed capacity, were accepted. Thus he must lecture to overflowing classrooms which can not possibly hold all the students who are supposed to attend.

The teacher at a national or public university<sup>2</sup> receives better treatment and has considerably more money for research. But the state of national and public universities is also far from satisfactory. Each time I visit European and American universities, I am made keenly aware of the fact that for American and European scholars, the university is really the place where they work. For the average Japanese faculty member, however, "moonlighting" has become a way of life. Even at national universities 66 percent of those of professorial rank and 53 percent of the assistant professors hold some job outside their home institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Although social demand may exert overwhelming pressure in some instances, the real reasons for taking a second job are poor working conditions and insufficient research funds. The actual situation is clearly reflected in the striking outflow of young university engineers and scientists to private business research institutes and to foreign universities. The overseas exodus is particularly strong in the field of mathematics, where Japanese standards are high and language

2. In addition to universities maintained by the national government, there are in Japan universities maintained by prefectural and municipal governments. The former are referred to here as national or government universities, and the latter as public.

3. Hattori Eitarō, ed., *Kagakusha no seikatsu to iken* (Tokyo: Nihon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, 1961), p. 94.

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disability minimal. In 1967, one report stated that 67 engineers, 48 scientists, and 43 medical doctors had immigrated to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Japanese national university professors are by no means unpatriotic. Nor are they averse to their calling of service to the university. If guaranteed adequate working conditions, the great majority would find satisfaction and joy in a life of teaching and research. In contemporary Japan, however, such a life is impossible. Even national universities, which are thought to be ideal when compared to private schools, offer little hope of fulfilling this ambition.

Conditions that allow teachers to go about their work with a sense of security and ensure students access to competent teaching are basic to the proper functioning of a university. Contemporary Japanese universities, however, do not fulfill even these minimal conditions. In the light of world standards, the differences between the old-system and the new-system national universities and the disparities among national, public, and private institutions of higher education are trivial. With respect to their internal confusion, to the lag in activities designed to strengthen higher education, and to the absence of the initiative required to carry out responsible reconstruction based on long-term planning, all Japanese universities display the same problems.

### The Universities of Industrial Societies

There can be no doubt that the serious maladies of the contemporary Japanese university are largely the product of the confusion occasioned by the expansion of higher education. Those who are bound by the traditional image of the university may feel that the only solution to the present disorder is to reduce the size of the university and return to the past once again. But enlargement of the scope of higher education is an inexorable historical force which

4. White Paper on Science and Technology, 1968.

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admits of no reversion. University expansion first appeared in the United States, but in recent decades it has also accompanied the industrialization of society in the Soviet Union and Europe. Wherever it has occurred, expansion has resulted in confusion, and this confusion has repeatedly led to a loss of any clear image of the university. Universities have been caught up in the giant process of social industrialization, and as they have drawn closer to society, they have found themselves unwittingly bound by new fetters, a phenomenon that has been skillfully described by the American political scientist Harold Lasswell as "restriction by partial incorporation."

Despite the inevitable and acute disorder that accompanies this new relationship between society and higher education, a conscious grasp of the situation and systematic reflection on the reconstruction of the university can lead to a way out of the most serious difficulties this relationship poses. In Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union, higher education has continued to advance because each country has recognized the importance of the problem and has undertaken a thoroughgoing reformation of the university. Japan, in contrast, has not even fully awakened to the confusion. Furthermore, responsible long-term planning is almost completely lacking. At the expense of students and faculty, universities continue to expand and the resulting disorder is consistently neglected. The present crisis in Japanese higher education thus stems more from the absence of responsible planning based on an accurate historical understanding of the origins of this confusion, than from the confusion itself.

The British sociologist A. H. Halsey attributes this chaos to the historical transition in the functions of universities and specifically to the radical changes that have taken place in the twentieth century. According to Halsey, the historical development of universities in the West can be divided into three periods. The first period, which began in the Middle Ages and lasted until the Industrial Revolution, saw the birth of the traditional European universities, Bologna in Italy, Oxford and Cambridge in England, Heidelberg in Germany, the University of Paris in France, and Harvard, Yale, and Columbia in North America. Removed from the secular world, the universities of this period were literally ivory towers where a restricted elite

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gathered to search for truth for truth's sake. But the university was unable to exclude itself from the rapid transformation of society which occurred as an aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. The search for truth gradually gave way to emphasis on the utilitarian sciences of technology, and the university became a place for specialized professional training.<sup>5</sup>

These developments ushered in a second period during which higher education underwent considerable change. The image of the university, however, was not radically affected by these changes. Max Weber's view of the university as a self-governing organization for the pursuit of truth for truth's sake preserved the traditional view and, as such, is representative of thinking about the university in this period.

Halsey's third period corresponds to the emergence of technological innovation in the twentieth century, a development which he stresses has been accompanied by swift and astounding changes in the university. In the wake of the technological revolution, a wave of university expansion swept across the world's industrial nations. Engineering, which had not even been included in university curricula prior to the industrial revolution, came to occupy a central position and, together with the sciences, enrolled approximately half of the student population. Humanities students, who had formerly constituted a small intellectual elite, now became a reserve army of white-collar workers. The gates of the universities were thrown open to women, and the university, in addition to providing professional training, took on the appearance of a national educational institution which provided general education for the common citizen.

The confusion attendant upon expansion, and the destruction of the university image brought about through closer relations with society are phenomena common to all industrial nations. But the depth of the crisis has been greater, the rate of change more swift, and the resultant disorder more serious in those countries that stood outside Western Europe and sought to catch up with and overtake the European powers. I am obviously referring to the two twentieth-

5. A. H. Halsey, ed., *Education, Economy, and Society* (Glen-coe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1961).

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century leaders of the non-European world, the United States and the Soviet Union. With respect to the tempo of expansion and the degree to which the university was adapted to the needs of an industrializing society, the development of the Japanese university bears a closer resemblance to higher education in these two countries than it does to the European pattern. In attempting to understand the history and present state of the Japanese university and in searching for ways in which it can be rebuilt, it is essential to observe the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the non-European character of higher education in Japan.

The percentage of college-age Japanese youth now enrolled in institutions of higher education is 16.6, a figure which is exceeded only by the 39 percent of the United States and which is slightly higher than the 12 percent of the Soviet Union. The "advanced" countries of Europe, France (10.5), England (5.6), and West Germany (5.7), all have lower figures.<sup>6</sup>

One other historical feature of the non-European university should also be noted. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, that is, even in Halsey's second period of university development, the traditional European universities did not have departments of engineering. This reflected the persistence of the conception of the university as a place where truth was to be pursued for truth's sake (that is, a place for the study of the nonpractical disciplines of theology, the humanistic sciences, mathematics, and the physical sciences) and the continuing belief that applied learning was unworthy of university research and education. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, several American universities added engineering departments. Japan followed in 1886 by including a school of engineering in the new Tokyo Imperial University. According to A. G. Korol's valuable study *Soviet Education for Science and Technology*, the Soviet Union also modeled its system of higher education on American scientific and technical education.

The sudden enlargement of universities in Japan occurred much

6. Ministry of Education, ed., *Wagakuni no kōtō kyōiku* (Tokyo: Printing Department, Ministry of Finance, 1964), p. 196.



later than in the United States and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the explosive energy displayed by these three countries in developing large-scale, mass universities offering a practical education has its origins in a common situation. It can be seen as the result of the attempts of these latecomers to the world arena of industrial competition to overtake the advanced countries through the adoption of far more exhaustive methods than those employed by the nations of Europe. They sought to make maximum use of the capabilities of their people by means of a thoroughgoing equalization of educational opportunities. Moreover, they endeavored to make the wisdom of the universities available for practical ends by seeking to relate higher education positively to the needs of industrial growth. Consciously and unconsciously, universities in these three countries followed this path of development.

The first and second stages of university development in these non-European, late-developing countries were short, and the historical foundations of the university were correspondingly shallow and weak. Consequently, the link between the university and society was strong, and this alone made university subservience to society an ever-present danger. In the non-European countries, the tradition of a self-governing ivory tower university, comparable to that of the European university, was firmly established only along the eastern seaboard of the United States. But even in the United States, these universities represented only one segment of higher education. The state colleges created under the provisions of the Morrill Act of 1862 were, from the beginning, dedicated to the improvement of agriculture and industry. In the case of the Soviet Union, where the revolution brought about a sharp break with tradition, and in Japan, where the Meiji Restoration unleashed a drive for national development, higher education bore the indelible marks of national universities developed under government leadership. Thus, in these three rapidly developed countries, higher education has been characterized by the large number of universities and by their contribution to the development of their respective societies. The price of this astonishing progress, however, has been an undeniable confusion in the image of the university.