



Liberal arts studies are key to Japan's economic revival

On June 8, 2015, the presidents of all 86 national universities received a notice in the name of the education and science minister, instructing them to endeavor to abolish their schools' departments of humanities and social sciences on both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels or to shift them to fields that are in higher social demand.

As president of a minor national university at the time, the messages in the notice were not unexpected. Yet, I felt a strong sense of indignation as I thought the notice indicated that Japan's education policies still follow the old tradition of neglecting humanities and social sciences in favor of natural sciences.

Subsequently I wrote a counterargument to the ministry's position on the June 22, 2015, issue of the Nikkei newspaper, and discussed the issue with then education minister Hakubun Shimomura in the Oct. 6 edition of the Economist magazine. In the Aug. 23 issue of The Japan Times, I wrote another article, "Humanities under attack." This attracted much more attention than I had anticipated, with my opinion quoted in a large number of European and U.S. newspapers and magazines.

Many knowledgeable persons from abroad commented that Japan's education policy of overemphasizing natural sciences and neglecting humanities and social sciences was anachronistic and out of sync with global standards, and could lead to the further deterioration of Japan's industrial competitiveness.

In particular, I felt encouraged by an email from Thomas Katsouleas, executive vice president and provost of the University of Virginia and an authority on electronics engineering. He said that at a time when a shift is taking place in Western advanced countries from STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) to STEAM (with arts added), Japanese universities alone are adopting higher education policies that run counter to the global trend.

It has been some time since Japanese electronics makers started losing their luster. As Apple founder Steve Jobs once pointed out, the principal players in technological renovation since the digital revolution have been engineers who are well versed in liberal arts in general and humanities in particular.

The biggest culprit of Japan's waning international competitiveness in electronics is an accumulation of changes for the worse in university curriculums and entrance exam systems that encourage both undergraduate and postgraduate engineering students to shun the liberal arts, especially humanities.

While advanced Western powers are indeed shifting emphasis of their education policies toward economic growth, they never seek to neglect liberal arts education. The standards of liberal arts education in the United States, Britain and France far surpass those in Japan. According to the Open Syllabus Explorer website, between 1,500 and 3,500 syllabuses at American universities make it compulsory for students to read classical works by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Nicolo Machiavelli, Thomas More, Adam Smith and Karl Marx as well as relatively contemporary writings like "Structure of Scientific Revolutions" by Thomas Kuhn and "Clash of Civilization and Remaking of World Order" by Samuel P. Huntington.

The education ministry says "true scholastic ability" is composed of three elements: (1) knowledge and skills, (2) ability for thinking, judgment and expression, and (3) willingness to cooperate with others. It is impossible to hope for elevating the abilities for thinking, judgment and expression without liberal education, of which humanities and social science constitute the core. This is accepted as self-evident by citizens in advanced Western nations.

In Japan, however, a majority of men of power and knowledge who serve on the government's policy advisory panels seem to think that liberal arts are harmful and useless for education aimed at achieving economic growth. This is a clear-cut indication of the wide discrepancy that

exists between those Japanese leaders and their overseas counterparts.

Technologies combined with liberal arts are necessary and indispensable for both the computer-driven third industrial revolution — which started in the 1990s and is nearing completion — and the fourth industrial revolution, which has just begun and is being driven by artificial intelligence capable of engaging in deep learning.

The third industrial revolution resulted in the competitiveness of the Japanese industry falling into a gradual decline, and the fourth industrial revolution is making it all the more essential to combine liberal arts and technologies. I strongly urge the leaders of our government to restructure the system of “education for the sake of economic growth.”

I am convinced that the modern Western European social ideologies of individualism, liberalism and democracy are universal values. For these three social ideologies to take root in this country it is necessary to nurture a critical mentality and ways of thinking based on humanities and social sciences. The strength of democracy lies in its ability to make those in power to listen to criticism with sincerity. Without criticism, democracy would fail to function.

A totalitarian state is certain to reject humanities and social sciences, and any state that rejects those disciplines is certain to become totalitarian. This thesis may be paraphrased as: A democratic nation needs knowledge in humanities and social sciences, and rejection of such knowledge will make democracy unworkable.

Promoting humanities and social sciences will contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of Japan’s industries during and after the fourth industrial revolution, and enable liberalism and democracy to function efficiently. For these two reasons, they are essential for Japan’s education policy today.

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