

Japan's new educational isolation

Would Mainichi readers be surprised to learn that Japan is preparing to ax one of the cornerstones of its higher education internationalization strategy?

The government's cost-cutting panel, which is trying to slash costs in a bid to trim the country's runaway public debt, voted on Nov. 18 to abolish and "restructure" the Global 30 project.

Launched last year with a budget of 3.2 billion yen, Global 30 envisioned "core" universities "dramatically" boosting the number of international students in Japan and Japanese students studying abroad, said the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

The ministry's strict selection process, however, meant that just 13 elite universities made the initial grade. Now the project has been terminated.

Can Japan afford this? Fewer than 4 percent of Japan's university students come from abroad -- 133,000, well below China (223,000) and the U.S. (672,000). Just 5 percent of its 353,000 university teachers are foreign, according to Ministry of Education statistics. Most of those are English teachers.

At the opposite end of the education pendulum, students here are increasingly staying at home: Japanese undergraduate enrollments in U.S. universities have plummeted by over half since 2000. Numbers to Europe are also down.

Japan, in the view of many, may be entering another period of educational sakoku -- or self-enforced isolation.

South Korea, with about half Japan's population, sends over twice as many students to the U.S. At some American universities, such as Cornell, Japan is behind not just China and South Korea, but even Thailand and tiny Singapore.

Japan's share of global research production, meanwhile, fell from 9.45 percent to 6.75 percent over the last decade, according to the latest Global Research Report. While the report noted "areas of excellence" in Japan's profile, it blamed its faltering performance on a dearth of international collaborations.

Global 30 was supposed to partly remedy those ills, helping Japanese universities reach a government goal of 300,000 foreign students by 2020, while sending the same number of Japanese students abroad.

"We think those universities will set an example for other colleges by leading with good practice," said Kato Shigeharu, deputy director of Higher Education Bureau at the ministry. "This practice will then diffuse to other colleges around the country."

That interview came before the government decision.

With the worst public debt in the industrialized world -- 900 trillion yen (\$10.6 trillion) -- Japan has much less fiscal leg-room than its competitors. So budget cutting may be inevitable, but why not intensify the effort to target useless dams or highways rather than education?

The decision has been greeted with dismay. "This government is destroying Japan," said Yoshida Go, a professor with the Office of International Strategic Planning at Nagoya University -- one of the 13 selectees.

"Quite honestly, Japan is late in the game of globalization in higher education. But the government's left



Renho, center, Japan's minister of government revitalization, attends a session to examine government projects, on Nov. 18 in Tokyo. (Mainichi)

hand doesn't know what its right hand is doing." (By David McNeill)

(Profile)

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