

# Plan E: Checklist for Japanese University Undergraduate System Paradigm Shift

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Although Japan's educational system is superb in a number of areas, its tertiary undergraduate system has critical structural challenges that have deflected reform attempts for generations. The intractability of the situation suggests that prevailing reform paradigms have failed and that a new paradigm is necessary. Previous frameworks focusing on the need for change have proven insufficient; accordingly this paper argues that the core problem is not awareness of the issues, but rather a disinterest by decision makers in reform implementation. Specifically, this report: explains why genuine reform is not pursued despite overwhelming evidence of the need for it, provides a checklist ("Plan E") to be used by decision-makers when a reform scenario occurs, and suggests four scenarios that might trigger spontaneous reform. Japan's over-reliance on examinations for university admission, a fixation on examination result t-scores (in Japanese, *hensachi*), a "cram school" (*juku*) system, a dearth of English in academics and administration, and the laxity of university undergraduate programs in general currently produce university graduates who are deficient in the critical thinking, communication, and language skills demanded by the global economy. Decision makers resist change because of the power and profits of the vested interests, the distracting existence of superficial or counterproductive "quasi-reforms," the number and complexity of the issues that results in a debilitating and cyclical "debate about the debate," and charges of cultural imperialism. Four possible reform trigger scenarios are a major leadership change at an existing university, the rebuilding of Japan generally or Tokyo specifically after a natural disaster, Japan's defeat in an international political or military conflict, and a black swan event (a crisis of unknowable origin that cannot be predicted).

**Key Words:** Japan, university, educational reform, entrance examinations, *hensachi*, *juku*, MEXT

## 1. BACKGROUND

Japan's overall academic system is excellent and to be greatly admired in many respects. At the bottom of the educational ladder, nurseries, pre-schools, and elementary schools provide safe, warm, and caring environments. At the very top, graduate programs are typically world-class, often with superb facilities and well-integrated foreign faculty and students. The evidence lies in Japan's respectable share of Nobel Prizes and other academic achievements. This said, Japan's obsessive focus in secondary education on preparing students to take undergraduate university entrance examinations – and the laxity of those programs after students are admitted – is an anachronism ill-suited to prepare Japan's future generations with the intellectual and moral skills needed to succeed in today's rapidly changing world. In November 2016, the president of a Japanese national university noted that Japan's international competitiveness has declined significantly from its peak a generation ago, and stated that without drastic reform Japan's ability to successfully manage its commercial, economic, political, social, and diplomatic

challenges will continue to deteriorate.<sup>1</sup> In this as in many other matters, Japan does not need more empty slogans. It needs sharper problem definition, better analysis, and more creative solutions. This report attempts all three.

In the interests of intellectual honesty, this topic demands an open and decisive accounting of the divergence observed between rhetoric and actions by Japan's political, economic, and administrative leadership over a period of several decades. Lip service supporting better academic integration with the world has been ubiquitous since at least the 1970's. A Ministry of Education white paper from 1974 states clearly: "It has to be said that Japan's state of affairs [in academic internationalization] is woefully insufficient."<sup>2</sup> In the nearly half-century since, a clear trend is visible. First, the same insufficiencies (e.g., English and other foreign language skills, exchange programs, additional foreign faculty) are repeatedly invoked. Second, numerical benchmarks and objective

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/11/21/commentary/japan-commentary/boosting-japanese-innovation/#.WUd1QuvyiUk>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/hakusho/html/hpaa198701/hpaa198701\\_2\\_044.html#tb1.1.3.4](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/html/hpaa198701/hpaa198701_2_044.html#tb1.1.3.4)

targets are conspicuous by their absence. Third, the Government of Japan (GOJ) fails to provide funding in practice to promote the reforms it champions in theory. At the same time, significant funding is made available for events or special projects with political rather than academic objectives. Lastly, actual reform is actively oppressed. A spectacular example of this was the swift crushing of Tokyo University's suggestion in 2012 that it hoped to align matriculation within five years to the global standard of autumn admission. Tokyo University is universally regarded as Japan's premier tertiary institution and is entirely government-controlled in practice. The immediate thwarting of this simple and brave proposal (which was withdrawn within months) was an action in direct contradiction to the commitment to reform Japan publishes in its white papers.<sup>3</sup>

Japanese universities are ranked openly and obsessively on a sole factor: the difficulty of their entrance examinations. Only a fraction of Japanese high school students will enter "name brand" institutions, and of those, only a fraction will actually join "name brand" companies or government agencies. Japan thus has a system with a tiny so-called "elite," perhaps 2% of its working population, and everyone else. While Japan, like most societies, gives its "elite" significant authority to manage the country, there are two factors that warrant comment. One is the extremely broad discretion given to the Japanese "elite" without sufficient checks and balances. This gives Japan a serious moral hazard problem in nearly every sector of society. The second is that the evidence of the last thirty years does not suggest that its "elite" possess the skills necessary to adequately address 21<sup>st</sup> century problems. Specifically, Japan's educational system is designed to identify and promote students with exceptional memories who can correctly identify the correct answer on multiple question tests. This might have been an excellent approach in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the scale of problems was typically local and plentiful data did not exist. However, it is counterproductive today, when essentially every issue has global ramifications and all of the world's information and other resources is instantly available either on the internet or via global human and supply chain networks. Problems are far more complex and problem resolution is no longer a matter of picking the "correct" answer, but rather formulating the best analysis using research, critical thinking, and communication skills in coordination with a global, mainly English-speaking network of experts and leaders.

The argument that Japan is not facing any crisis no longer resonates with those familiar with Japan's political economy or demographics. The first sentence of a report published in April 2012 by Japan's largest and most powerful economic organization, Keidanren,

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/01/19/national/todai-panel-recommends-fall-enrollment/#.WUexvevyiUk>

stated simply: "Japan could fall from its position as a developed country."<sup>4</sup> Awareness that Japan's current demographics pose an acknowledged and existential threat to Japan's survival as a first-world state dates back to at least the 1980's, when the birthrate began to plunge at the height of Japan's postwar economic miracle. Both the problem and its scale are unprecedented. The *Independent* of the U.K. noted in April 2017: "Japan's population is set to plummet from 127 million to 88 million by 2065 and is projected to drop even further to just 51 million by 2115 if current trends continue."<sup>5</sup> Possibly only the Black Death in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe – when "a third of the world died"<sup>6</sup> – provides a historical comparison of population decline.

The Asian mainland with China at its center has the world's largest share of population and by mid-century will also boast the world's largest share of the global economy. If Japan is to reverse its current economic and demographic decline, it needs to drastically shift its educational system. The good news is that Japan has many excellent departments in some of its universities. There are many brilliant, well-intentioned faculty and staff throughout Japan who are well aware of the challenges and appreciate the need for change. The bad news is that all of these warnings have been written before many times to no effect. This suggests strongly that implementation, rather than awareness, is the stumbling block.

This paper offers a checklist rather than a proposal *per se*. The difference is subtle but important. An educational system is a reflection of its leaders' fundamental values, and some in Japan reject proposals from "outsiders" as unwanted at best and cultural imperialism at worst. Given that nearly every shred of Japan's educational system was adapted at some point from a foreign model, the logical basis for such claims is debatable, but the push-back exists nevertheless. There is also, regrettably, no evidence to suggest that Japan is eager to adopt radical new proposals at the current time. Quite the opposite: politically and socially, Japan has clearly entered a conservative phase, a fact strikingly reflected in a series of highly controversial new laws and, most recently, concrete moves to revise its constitution. Rather than a *proposal* marketed to uninterested, indifferent, or even hostile customers, a *checklist* is merely a tool that can be picked up and used by anyone who wishes. Creating a checklist both fulfills the author's ethical responsibility to be pro-active and may with luck help create an environment in which the tool will eventually be seen and used by an interested party.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.21ppi.org/english/pdf/120827.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/japan-population-drop-39-million-2065-birth-rate-plummet-children-demographic-timebomb-a7678116.html>

<sup>6</sup> Jean Froissart, quoted in Tuchman, B.W. *A Distant Mirror*, Random House, New York, 1978, p.94

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

As is the case with most educational issues, the core problem is its complexity. This report attempts to minimize the complexity by separating the issues into 1) proximate issues, 2) ultimate issues, and 3) conceptual frameworks for problem analysis. The obvious problems with Japan's tertiary educational system, that is, the proximate or immediate issues have been so thoroughly documented and discussed over the past half-century that this report will provide only a cursory review of the most serious in broad outline. This paper argues that as serious as they are, the proximate issues are insignificant compared to the ultimate or fundamental issues. Lastly, this report presents an explanation for why problems have not been addressed.

### (1) Proximate issues

The key immediate issue facing Japanese tertiary education is that there are multiple immediate problems which, viewed as a whole, form an intractable miasma. The absence of any consensus concerning their priority inhibits or prevents substantially addressing any of them. Four issues repeatedly raised by both Japanese and foreign observers are as follows:

#### a) Lack of pertinence to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (obsolete)

From an historical perspective, Japan's university undergraduate system is stuck in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus it is academically uncompetitive and internationally unpopular. It is based on a medieval memorization model adopted from the German system that prevailed in the 1860's. Having never been significantly reformed since, it is now entirely unsuitable to the needs and technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Evidence of obsolescence can be seen in the precise six-month offset of Japan's academic year with the prevailing global standard, rankings of specific schools and the national system,<sup>7</sup> the rarity of foreign students and faculty, and comparison of test scores with other countries. Lack of the English language in courses and administration limits the integration of foreign faculty, students, and administrators. Japan's failure to educate its population in English is explicable only with the assumption that keeping the population uninformed (unable to read, for example, articles about Japan that might be critical of it) is deliberate.

#### b) Produces poor results (ineffective)

From a results-orientation perspective, Japan's system is wasteful and ineffective. The academic laxity of university undergraduate programs results in graduates who are deficient in the critical thinking, communication, and foreign language skills, especially English, that are demanded by a global economy – a

trend that has worsened significantly since the 1990's.<sup>8</sup> The university admission testing process effectively ruins the childhood of many by making them spend their afternoons, evenings, weekends, and holidays studying, in many cases from the age of two or three until the age of eighteen, rather than playing, reading for enjoyment, or spending time with family or friends. It objectively harms many family lives and finances. It does not exist in any country with a highly ranked university system, and a strong argument can be made that it exists primarily to serve a national testing industry, including the cram schools, that puts company profits and political favoritism ahead of a healthy, vibrant society.

#### c) Ethically compromised (harmful)

From an ethical perspective, Japan's system is hypocritical at best and cruel at worst. It claims to be unbiased, but the reliance on examinations as the *de facto* only means of university and college matriculation has resulted naturally in a "cram school" (*juku*) system that disproportionately favors the well-off. The system claims to respect students as individuals but brands each of them – for life – with a single number: the t-score of their university. It claims to promote social welfare, but it stigmatizes 98% of all participants as "failures." (This is the percentage of young people who do not graduate from so-called "elite" universities and get employed by so-called "elite institutions.") The lifetime association of Japanese graduates with the t-score of their university's entrance examination results in low social and labor mobility. Moreover, the examination industry as a whole is ethically compromised as a result of collusion between the \$10 billion a year<sup>9</sup> cram school industry and universities, politicians, and bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, the Times Higher Education ranked Japan third in its list of top five major economies with education systems that it defined as "corrupt."<sup>11</sup>

#### d) Lack of academic rigor (undemanding)

From an educational perspective, Japan's undergraduate programs might as well not exist at all. Japanese universities exist to prepare and administer their annual entrance examinations – usually multiple tests for every department – not to provide a quality education. Slogans aside, universities have no tangible objectives beyond recruiting, admitting, and retaining students. Individual professors or departments often do their best, and a highly self-motivated student can certainly get an excellent education if they try, but all that is required of most students at most universities is that they meet very low attendance standards. Four-year graduation rates of 98–99% show clearly

<sup>8</sup> <http://hamada.u-shimane.ac.jp/research/32kiyou/10sogo/seisaku09.data/seisaku0904.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://kabutan.jp/news/marketnews/?b=n201402240016>

<sup>10</sup> Education-related scandals in Japan are so common that two major ones are ongoing as this report is being written.

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/top-5-major-economies-with-corrupt-education-systems/2007926.article>

<sup>7</sup>

<http://www.universitas21.com/article/projects/details/152/u21-rankings-of-national-higher-education-systems>

that once admitted, graduation is guaranteed as long as a student occasionally shows up. (By comparison, the six-year graduation rate for U.S. universities is less than 60%).<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of the handful of Japanese students who do drop out do so voluntarily rather than as a result of academic attrition.<sup>13</sup> Further evidence is the dismal economic, political, and diplomatic performance of Japan over the last three decades, the prime exhibit being Japan's astonishing failure to prepare for its demographic trends. More than 40% of all Japanese will be 65 or older in the near future, and Japan has no strategies in place despite having had two generations to prepare. The socio-economic costs of supporting its elderly in the century ahead will present an existential threat to Japan's survival as a first-world nation.

## (2) Ultimate issues

As serious as they are, of more concern than the proximate issues are the underlying reasons why the problems have proven so resistant to resolution, or even meaningful debate. A dozen of these underlying reasons are as follows:

- 1) The problems are individually complicated in and of themselves.
- 2) The problems mutually reinforce each other.
- 3) The *status quo* is supported by some of the most powerful groups in Japan: vested interests with the financial and social means to suppress opposition.
- 4) These vested interests have not only direct power to derail reform proposals on the record, but also indirect, passive-aggressive methods that allow them to oppose or subvert reform off the record while at the same time evading all accountability.
- 5) Some of the problems are sufficiently socially and culturally sensitive (in other words, taboo) to ensure that they do not receive the adequately rigorous academic examination that is a necessary step in resolution.
- 6) For historical reasons, Japan has a complex, hybrid system of tertiary education resulting in an environment that is extraordinarily opaque in terms of decision making, authority, responsibility, and accountability. For example, in theory Japanese universities may do almost entirely as they please. In practice, nearly every action, no matter how small, must be approved by micro-managers in Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, known by the acronym MEXT. MEXT's primary method of control is the distribution of massive financial subsidies without which, given their current business models, nearly all universities in Japan would immediately go bankrupt.
- 7) The variety of education-related issues and problems creates a scenario which can be visualized by the game known colloquially as "whack-a-mole," where debate

over one issue quickly gets sidetracked and taken over by one or more different, entirely separate issues. The constant diverting can either be deliberate or simply a result of carelessness. The result is an endless and unrewarding "debate about what is being debated."

8) Many of the issues (such as the perceived absolute "need" asserted by some Japanese to have their school entrance ceremonies under the early April cherry blossoms) can be manipulated to appeal strongly to emotion rather than logic.

9) Many Japanese, including persons with authority,<sup>14</sup> openly deny the existence of any problem at all, typically by looking backwards to Japan's economic performance in the postwar period and noting Japan's currently high standard of living. The argument is that Japan's educational system created this high standard of living and is therefore in no need of reform. This argument can be logically refuted in many ways; unfortunately, one of the lessons all students in Japan are taught is that logically refuting persons in authority is not permitted.

10) Attention and funding is diverted away from genuine reform by the distracting existence of superficial but ineffective "quasi-reforms" or worse, policies with results so bad that they give reform a negative reputation. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, or the proposals in the current so-called "2020 reforms"<sup>15</sup> are examples of the former, and the truly disastrous "*yutori-kyoiku*" policies of the early 2000's are examples of the latter. Both give decision-makers a veneer of plausibility when confronted with calls for fundamental reform, but in the end maintain the *status quo*, reinforce the *status quo*, or sour the public on any reform at all.

11) As alluded to previously, Japan is, relatively speaking, a conservative society with a tradition of acquiescence to authority and whoever claims to be in charge at the moment. This tendency is compounded at present by a visibly neoconservative trend that has many observers, both inside and outside Japan, openly alarmed.

12) Because Japan could implement universal English education and critical thinking reform practically overnight if Japan's leaders wished, the most logical reason why this does not happen is the simplest: Japanese leaders do not wish it. This conclusion makes excellent sense if one assumes that Japan's senior politicians and bureaucrats have no interest in a population with critical thinking skills and connections to global networks that are not controlled by Japan's information monopolies and oligopolies.

## (3) Problem-solving conceptual framework

The intractability of the issues involved in Japan's tertiary education suggests that prevailing reform

<sup>12</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/toushin/1217067.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/toushin/1217067.htm)

<sup>14</sup> c.f., Keio University Professor Emeritus Takao Suzuki wrote a 2013 book titled "90% of Japanese Have No Need for English"

<sup>15</sup> <http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/139466>

paradigms have failed and that a new paradigm is necessary. Prevailing paradigms include the cyclic, four-stage “Plan-Do-Check-Act” (PDCA) and five-stage OPDCA (adding an initial “Observe”) concepts, and the six-stage “Problem Awareness-> Problem Definition-> Data Collection-> Analysis-> Conclusion-> Recommendation / Action linear concept. The logical if regrettable conclusion is that Japan’s decision-makers are not and have not been sincere in their expressions of desire for reform. If this were not the case, there would be objective activity which is not evident in either the “Do” or “Data Collection” areas of the above models. For example, although the GOJ has officially called for more foreign faculty since at least 1974, it was not until thirty-six years later, in 2010, that it even began collecting statistics showing the actual number of foreign faculty in the country.<sup>16</sup> By a process of elimination, it must be assumed that Japanese decision-makers, despite their rhetoric, do not want reform and will resist it with every resource at their disposal. It thus follows that either reform will never occur, which is unlikely, or that it will happen only organically and unplanned, which history suggests will be triggered by an external threat or shock, most likely of a massive, society-changing nature.

### 3. PLANE

This paper asserts that continuing a debate that consumes resources while producing no results is unproductive at best and counterproductive at worst. There is no point in actively attempting to assist someone who has not asked for assistance and consistently refuses it when offered. The alternative is to suggest improvement passively; that is, to create a useful tool and then lay it out to be picked up by anyone who wishes to use it. The tool presented in this paper is “Plan E,” and it consists of a checklist of twenty-five items that any university in Japan could, if it wished, implement immediately. These steps are described below. The order of the steps is irrelevant; this is an all-or-nothing proposal and all of the steps must be taken more or less simultaneously.

The argument might be raised that none of the items in this checklist involve mindset. This argument implies, correctly, that simply adapting the characteristics of a modern, global-oriented 21<sup>st</sup> century university does not make it so, and that what would make it so would be the talents, skill, and motivation of the university’s faculty and staff. However, this paper argues that Plan E is sufficient in and of itself for two reasons. First, there exists no checklist, nor any other method, for reforming a mindset: this must – more or less by definition – come from within. Second, this paper asserts that any university that chose to implement Plan E would only do so if there was already a sufficiently

forward-thinking and aggressive determination on the behalf of the faculty and staff to make it succeed. In other words, any adopters of Plan E would be self-selected in strong favor of success.

3.1. Revise the internal decision-making structure in the university. In nearly every university in Japan, there is currently no genuine diversity in age, gender, nationality or background. Decision-makers tend to be men near, at, or in many cases past retirement age who are overloaded, overstressed, indifferent, and/or cannot, will not, or do not think strategically. Instead, older and more experienced faculty and staff should run day-to-day operations while younger faculty and staff should have the lead in long-term planning that they, not those within a few years of retirement, will have to live with. Furthermore, to incorporate global faculty and staff, eventually all administration will need to be in English or at least bi-lingual Japanese/English.

3.2. Begin the school year starting in late August or early September. Allow matriculation and graduation in each semester.

3.3. Introduce an overseas study requirement for graduation. (This is the primary reason for needing the summer semester free: for overseas study).

3.4. Introduce an English-language requirement for graduation.

3.5. Forbid the use of, and refuse to cooperate with, anything related to entrance examinations.

3.6. Forbid the use of, and refuse to cooperate with, anything related to t-scores (*hensachi*).

3.7. Judge all admissions using the “whole-person concept” (educational background, high school grades, standard tests such as SAT, ACT, TOEIC, and TOEFL; interviews, essays, diversity of nationality, regional, gender, age, social status, *et alia*)

3.8. All admissions will be to the university itself. (Currently, Japanese universities generally only admit freshman directly into a department or major, with little or no ability to switch later. All students must thus select their four-year college major when they are still in high school.)

3.9. Students will make their major selection at any time, preferably by the end of their second year. It will be a competitive process and again, decisions will be made using a holistic approach based on a combination of preference, merit, faculty and other resources, and department diversity.

3.10. Employ a year-round, rolling admissions policy. Applicants may apply at any time for admission to any semester.

3.11. Employ a two or three semester system. Choose the prevailing global standard used by partner overseas schools to maximize foreign study.

3.12. Classes earning 4-credits must be standard. (Currently, nearly all university classes are 2-credits, meaning one 90-minute class per week. This allows students to take a huge number of classes, but none with depth or the ability for faculty and students to develop strong relationships. Specifically, it is impossible to teach any foreign language successfully

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?bid=000001058821&cycode=0>

at the rate of 90 minutes per week.)

3.13. Introduce a 4-year, all-English option. This will recruit foreign students, Japanese returnees from abroad, and both Japanese and foreign students graduating from international schools in Japan.

3.14. Significantly increase fundraising and tuition while simultaneously expanding student financial aid. Until Japan moves toward making all university education free, utilize a market-based approach. Care must be taken to avoid creating the student debt problems facing students in, to use the most extreme example, the U.S.

3.15. Use professionally owned and managed websites and online marketing in at least Japanese, English, and Chinese.

3.16. Promote enrollment for all ages, not just 17-year-old high school students.

3.17. Employ little or no active marketing or commercial promotion. An excellent website and IT systems, press releases, and community service by faculty is all that is needed in the Internet Age.

3.18. Establish contacts with international schools and free and experimental schools.

3.19. Create a new overall business model that does not rely on any MEXT funding (in case it is terminated, which eventually it probably will be regardless due to lack of GOJ funds).

3.20. Acquire accreditation from international organizations. This is insurance against MEXT withdrawing its own.

3.21. Create a single, flexible, unified human resources system for all faculty and staff with equal treatment for everyone. This will reduce the degree of discrimination faced by foreigners, minorities, and women.

3.22. Implement global standard, state-of-the-art privacy and IT systems. If these are not in place, foreign faculty and students will go elsewhere. At present, probably no university in Japan adequately protects personally identifiable information (PII) – and even the most sensitive information, such as medical records, are grossly unprotected and subject to theft and/or abuse.

3.23. Create and enact anti-harassment policies that prevent harassment before it happens, identify it when it does, and deter offenders. Current systems not only allow harassment, but often promote and encourage it.

3.24. There must be no picking and choosing from these twenty-five items. This is an up/down, yes/no, all-or-nothing proposal.

3.25. Enact everything in this plan simultaneously and within two years from start of implementation.

## 4. PLAN E ARGUMENTS & REBUTTALS

A major weapon used to thwart any change is the litany of arguments that is typically thrown *en masse* against even modest attempts at reform. The result is the rhetorical equivalent of an internet “denial of service” or DoS attack. (A denial-of-service attack is a

computing cyber-attack where the perpetrator seeks to make a resource unavailable to its intended users by disrupting IT services, typically by flooding the targeted resource with superfluous requests in an attempt to overload systems and prevent legitimate requests from being fulfilled.) Upon close examination, most or all of the arguments thus thrown out do not withstand logical scrutiny, and often appeal to emotion rather than logic, although a good debater can often mask the difference to all but the shrewdest observer. As an appendix to Plan E, the following is a list of the arguments that are most consistently used to block reform and rebuttals to the arguments.

Argument 4.1. Japan is just fine. No reform is necessary.

Rebuttals:

4.1.1. Japan has had zero economic growth (nominal GDP) since 1990. It has had the worst economic performance of all OECD countries over nearly every period over the last thirty years. By comparison, China’s has averaged 14% annually.<sup>17</sup>

4.1.2. There has been no progress on most diplomatic issues in many decades (e.g. Northern Territories, Okinawa, the Senkaku Islands). As of today, for example, Japan remains technically in a state of war with Russia.

4.1.3. Problems related to population and demographics are well-known, serious, growing, and accelerating.

4.1.4. Nearly half (44.5%) of all Japanese universities are operating below their student quota (a measure of school capacity and financial viability).<sup>18</sup> This percentage would be much higher except for the fact that many universities in the last five to ten years have either already closed or have reduced their capacity.

4.1.5. Many Japanese universities are beginning to collapse financially. Roughly 10% (75~80 schools) have already closed or merged since Japan’s 18-year-old population peaked in 1992. Problems will accelerate markedly under the dual threat of Japan’s “2018 Problem” (another precipitous plunge in the number of 18-year-olds starting that year) and the gradual reduction of MEXT financial subsidies.

4.1.6. Japan’s public debt is exploding and is, by most measurements, the worst in the world.<sup>19</sup>

Argument 4.2. Reform should be gradual, not radical.

Rebuttals:

4.2.1. Japan has demonstrated repeatedly that it rejects all genuine educational reform, gradual as well as radical.

4.2.2. Japan has given official lip service to reform for decades, but provides no funding to back it. Proof

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, data accessed in June 2017

<sup>18</sup> [http://notes.co.jp/2017/05/18/university-shortage\\_of\\_applicants/raw\\_data\\_at\\_www.shigaku.go.jp/files/shigandoukou283.pdf](http://notes.co.jp/2017/05/18/university-shortage_of_applicants/raw_data_at_www.shigaku.go.jp/files/shigandoukou283.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> CIA data, accessed from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_public\\_debt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_public_debt)

of this is in national budgets. The predictable result is poor English test results, poor creative thinking skills, and increasingly uncompetitive and lackluster companies. The state of Japan's electronic giants (Sharp, Toshiba, NEC, Sony, etc.) provides vivid evidence.

4.2.3. Tokyo University's proposal to move towards an autumn academic year was quickly quashed.

4.2.4. Japan has not and does not support foreign faculty with financial subsidies.

4.2.5. MEXT does not act in response to harassment of foreign faculty even when presented with documentary evidence, for example, of double contracts (one contract promising tenure before hiring, and a different, limited-term contract after hiring).

4.2.6. Collusion and non-transparency of politicians and MEXT with special interests is well known. Public scandals occur on a regular basis, with not one but two major ones going on in Japan as this report is being written in June 2017.

4.2.7. Japan's educational systems has been ranked as one of the most corrupt in the developed world. This suggests the need for drastic rather than incremental reform.

4.2.8. Because Japan has a record of resisting minor educational reform, radical reform ought to be at least attempted as an alternative strategy.

Argument 4.3. Japan cannot shift to the standard academic year because everything else in Japan remains on the old fiscal year.

Rebuttals:

4.3.1. This argument is pure supposition with no documentary evidence to support it.

4.3.2. This argument is technically false. Thousands of students and teachers in Japan – those in the international school systems and foreign students and academics temporarily in Japan – are already using the global standard year.

4.3.3. By using summer terms, seniors can graduate one semester early if they wish, thus keeping them on the Japanese hiring/technical examination/further study cycle.

4.3.4. Once a leader sets an example that succeeds, or at least does not fail, the rest of Japan may follow in time. If this plan is executed well, perhaps eventually every school in Japan will adjust to the new system rather quickly. Historically, this is the way Japan operates.

4.3.5. There is no law or reason why any entity needs to act in strict conformance with all others. For example, many companies, including large, famous ones such as Fast Retailing, operate using fiscal years that differ from the standard. For them, it works just fine.

Argument 4.4. MEXT will never allow it.

Rebuttal:

4.4.1. Because the GOJ generally and MEXT specifically both have formally endorsed globalization, MEXT has only two options: support these initiatives

with actions as well as words – or be revealed openly as hypocritical.

Argument 4.5. MEXT will endorse these ideas in theory but harass implementers in practice.

Rebuttal:

4.5.1. This is precisely why the Proposals 3.19 and 3.20 exist. The worst MEXT could do is withdraw both all funding and all accreditation. In this case, an institution with a viable business model can easily obtain a global accreditation instead and continue operations.

Argument 4.6. There is no “customer base” for a university like this.

Rebuttals:

4.6.1. In 2017, an estimated 2% of all children in Japan are home-schooled.<sup>20</sup> Two per cent of 1.17 million 18-year-olds is more than 23,000 freshman candidates. Recruiting the top 3.4% of them would fill an entire class of 800 students – a typical complement at a Japanese private university.

4.6.2. A university that implements these reforms can recruit many outstanding students for the autumn term who fail the competitive January-March exams. Not all students will want to waste a full year testing again, and tens of thousands will evaluate highly at an alternative that allows them to begin only a few months later.

4.6.3. Foreign students who want to study in Japan but lack sufficient Japanese language skills will find that a school that implements these reforms is exactly what they need.

4.6.4. Japan now has twenty-seven international schools that graduate 200+ high school seniors each year in May and June, perfect timing for a school that begins in the autumn.

Argument 4.7. No one in Japan will pay JPY 2-3 million per year for college.

Rebuttals:

4.7.1. Japan sends 60,000+ students abroad every year (and the number is increasing) who pay many times this amount to attend schools with similar characteristics. Recruiting a mere 1.3% of them would fill an entire freshman class of 800 students at a mid-sized university.

4.7.2. There are millions of wealthy and extremely wealthy families in Japan who, precisely because they are rich, can afford to take a risk.

Argument 4.8. No university can move that quickly (i.e., two years) to implement these reforms.

Rebuttals:

4.8.1. This argument is pure supposition with no objective data to support it. This paper predicts that some university will simply do so, and the first one that does gains the all-important marketing “first mover

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<sup>20</sup>

tt-897-escaping-the-education-system-and-coming-out-normal-ebiz-news-from-japan

advantage.”

4.8.2. If a given university does not act, its competitors that do will garner all of the acclaim, credit, and honor. Institutions that act later will likely survive, but only as imitators and not as leaders.

Argument 4.9. Japan will *never* give up the April school start because of the cherry blossom tradition.

Rebuttals:

4.9.1. From their origins in 1877, Japan’s universities started their school years in the autumn for 44 years, until 1921. Moving the universities’ start time is merely reverting to the original model and the most globally practiced system.

4.9.2. Starting school under cherry blossoms was a tactic of Japan’s 1920’s military fascists, done specifically to a) align with compulsory military service and b) foment a conformist and arguably fascist “Die at the height of your youth and beauty” mentality.

4.9.3. Starting school at a different month of the year would free up time when the blossoms are blooming to actually enjoy them.

4.9.4. Everything in the world is a tradeoff and involves balancing infinite needs and wants with limited resources. Japan as a nation has yet to definitively answer a highly provocative but very simple question: “Are all the people of Japan, especially the younger generations, genuinely willing to risk their nation’s position in the world and their chances of maximizing future success for the sake of keeping their school year aligned to a tree?”

Argument 4.10. Many students/families who want to attend a university such as this won’t be able to afford it.

Rebuttal:

4.10.1. The solution to this is to create a business model that allows a university to subsidize students who cannot pay full tuition, using funds received from the students and families who can.

Argument 4.11. Japan simply doesn’t want change. It is happy with the status quo. It does not want citizens with an international orientation, capable of critical thinking and functional English skills.

Rebuttals:

4.11.1. If so, then nearly every Japanese politician and business leader in the last thirty years has not been telling the truth. The constant refrain for at least half a century has been about the need for change and reform. This is not a situation an ethical educator should support.

4.11.2. There can be no doubt that the wealthy, relatively elderly, very powerful men who run Japan are delighted with the status quo. If Japan’s part-time workers, young families, children, women, and foreigners feel the same, then it is the responsibility of this checklist’s detractors to prove it.

4.11.3. If true, the responsibility of educators and administrators is not to meekly accept it, but to be leaders who suggest a better way.

Argument 4.12. There is no way everyone at any university will go along with this.

Rebuttal:

4.12.1. There is no need for them to go along with this. Participation can be purely voluntary. Anyone who objects can opt out and simply go on doing what they’ve been doing before. Their lives will probably change very little if at all.

Argument 4.13. How will objections be handled?

Rebuttal:

4.13.1. Everyone (faculty, staff, parents, students, and the community) should be kept fully informed at every stage and asked for their input.

4.13.2. Every objection should be addressed and posted online to ensure transparency and fairness.

4.13.3. Every suggestion should either be incorporated, or the reason why it cannot should also be posted online.

Argument 4.14. There is no guarantee that this will be a success.

Rebuttal:

4.14.1. Nothing in life is guaranteed. This checklist is no different.

4.14.2. Given the circumstances, doing nothing is even more certain to result in a lack of success. Keidanren itself notes that Japan is in crisis and “could fall from its position as a developed country.”

Argument 4.15. It is too risky. (Or: “It will be way too much hard work”.)

Rebuttal:

4.15.1. There is risk involved, but doing otherwise sends the message: “Never do what is the productive, moral, worthwhile, and courageous thing because it is too risky or because it will involve hard work.” This is not an intellectually or morally honest message that anyone should convey, and it is especially the wrong message for a university to send to its students and the rest of society.

Argument 4.16. “Japan’s schools must support Japanese values, and this proposal is not compatible with Japanese values.”

Rebuttals:

4.16.1. “Japanese values” may exist in theory, but no absolute consensus has ever existed or ever will exist on what they are in practice.

4.16.2. Japan is a signatory to many agreements and treaties that clearly declare that citizens have obligations to humanity that are at least as important as their obligations to the country on their passport.

4.16.3. Supporters of the above assertion should either prove the second assumption with qualitative evidence and documentary support, or withdraw their claim.

Argument 4.17. “You’re just an ignorant foreigner who can never understand Japan” (if the person making



an argument happens to be non-Japanese).

Rebuttal:

4.17.1 The opinion of foreigners, whether inside Japan or outside, is not the point. The point is, why not offer the young people of Japan a choice, give them a voice, and let them decide?

## 5. REFORM SCENARIOS

The evidence of 1500 years of Japanese history in general and the most recent 150 years in particular strongly suggests that Japan's society has locked itself into a position from which it cannot or will not willingly extricate itself. Actions speak louder than words, and the actions of every element of Japanese society at present point in the direction of no significant reform. History also suggests that sudden, drastic, and useful reform is more likely provided an external triggering event lights the fuse. The following are four possible reform trigger scenarios.

### (1) Generational leadership change at an existing university

Japan has about 780 universities, 78% of which are private.<sup>21</sup> Many of these private universities are "one man" entities in which the owner (either the founder or his successor, always male) controls every aspect of the institution. It is possible that a second, third, or fourth-generation successor, inheriting a financially failing operation and determined to massively differentiate himself from his predecessor and competitors, demonstrates the vision, leadership, and resolve to evolve into a global-standard university. In doing so, he must have a business model providing for 100% self-sufficiency, as MEXT may reduce or eliminate subsidies, grants, and other funding, and possibly accreditation as well. A variation on this scenario could, in theory, be the administrative control or even establishment of a Japanese university by an academic outsider or foreign investor.

### (2) Rebuilding of Tokyo (or Japan) after a natural disaster

Psychologically, a natural disaster is an opportunity for self-reflection. Historically, Japan has used natural disasters as opportunities for introspection and consideration of the possibility of divine anger or retribution. At such times the nation may be more open to the possibility – or the necessity – for reform or rehabilitation. The 2011 earthquake and tsunami, for example, promoted a healthy (if brief and stillborn) debate about Japan's reliance on nuclear power. Aside from World War II, Tokyo last suffered catastrophic destruction in 1923, and is widely considered overdue for a high-magnitude earthquake. More than one-third of the universities in Japan are located in the greater Tokyo area (Tokyo, Chiba, Saitama, and Kanagawa

prefectures). A massive earthquake and/or tsunami, possibly combined with a massive typhoon, drought, epidemic, or other natural disaster might provide the kind of shock that results in a mindset shift.

### (3) Defeat in an international conflict

Japan's last opportunity for significant social reform (e.g., women's suffrage) occurred after its defeat by the Allied Forces in World War II. Although strictly hypothetical, a political or military conflict with a rival in the Eastern Hemisphere is not out of the question, given that Japan has numerous territorial disputes and is still technically in a state of war with Russia. In the event Japan finds itself defeated in a significant economic, political, or military conflict with a neighbor, the resulting shock to the populace might spur radical social reform in other areas, such as education.

### (4) A "black swan"

The black swan is a metaphor that describes an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The term is based on an ancient saying which presumed black swans did not exist, but the saying was rewritten after black swans were discovered in the wild. In this case, it refers to an event of unknown origin that cannot be predicted, with far-reaching implications.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Japan needs intellectual and moral skills from its university graduates that the current system is not providing. It is ironic that a key feature of Japanese society – as in many others, including the United States – is that discussion of education reform is practically an industry in itself. Lack of awareness of the issues is not the problem. Rather, the problem is a thick mixture of complexity, confusion, ambiguity, resignation, exhaustion, intimidation, and fear that clogs up reform before it can begin to flow.

Given the human race's historically impressive ability to withstand a bad *status quo*, and since most claims of impending doom do not ultimately come to pass, calls for urgent reform are often not looked upon with respect nor implemented if they are. Under the current circumstances in Japan, it seems pointless to continue a debate that consumes scarce resources but is objectively unproductive or even counterproductive. On the other hand, doing nothing is neither intellectually nor morally satisfying. This leaves the would-be academic reformer in Japan with a genuine dilemma.

Traditionally, the only two alternatives available when faced with such a dilemma are to be active or to do nothing. The former involves continuing to use the normal, expected, and accepted approaches, knowing

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/002/002b/1368900.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1368900.htm)

this has never succeeded in the past and there is no evidence that it will succeed in the future. The latter involves doing nothing, which is irresponsible. This report suggests an alternative or third way, that of passive activity. Instead of proposing reform, this report merely suggests conditions that may be conducive to reform, and lays out a checklist for use when (or if) such conditions arise. The years ahead may well be the country's last chance to prevent Japan's "lost decades," already three in number, from transforming the 21<sup>st</sup> century into what future historians may well refer to as "Japan's lost century."

Finally, from a human perspective, Japanese students at every level will be happier and better prepared for life if Japan's educational focus shifts from passing examinations to managing a work-life balance. In particular, children should be allowed the opportunity to enjoy their childhood. College-age students will be both better adjusted and more successful in undergraduate programs that are more similar to Japan's graduate programs that focus on progress during a course of study rather than a one-time, life-defining entrance screening. Given the many alternatives available, it is hard to imagine a child willing to defend a system that brands the huge majority – including himself or herself as a matter of statistical likelihood – as failures or second-class citizens, and furthermore a system in which even for those few who succeed, most are likely to conclude many years later that the rewards were not, in the end, worth the cost.