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Opening Japan Up to the World

WITH A GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS AT HAND, IT IS CLEAR THAT MAJOR CHANGE IS NEEDED among leading nations. For Japan, this comes at a time when two prime ministers have left office in barely 2 years, and support for the new prime minister, Taro Aso, is weak less than 2 months after he took up office. Perhaps the public, sensing the need for change, is pessimistic about the possibilities, given that Japan has been so resistant to change over the past decade.

Clearly, today's global competition demands entrepreneurs with distinct out-of-the-box talents. The flattening global market is also driving the need for diversity and collaboration, essential for the kind of open innovation that creates new markets. Like other nations, Japan's investments in science, technology, and innovation are crucial to its economic growth. Universities play a key role in nurturing future talents and leaders in every sector of society. Therefore, government support for academic science is vitally important. However, in Japan, such investment by the government often fails to nurture the potential of these individuals. This is partly due to an insular, hierarchical, and male-dominated system that still prevails in every sector of Japanese society, including academic institutions.

Meanwhile, many universities in other countries have become more open to the world, thereby becoming cores of the global community. They are creating programs that attract students from around the world and address global challenges in areas such as health, energy, climate change, and the environment. The international student-faculty-alumni network that these efforts forge is a powerful tool that is crucial for any nation's future success. In contrast, only a few universities in Japan are truly international: At Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, 50% of the undergraduate students are international and half of the courses are given in English; Akita International University, a typical small liberal arts college, has 40% international students, with most courses taught in English.

Leading universities outside of Japan aim to attract not only the world's most promising students but also the best faculty and academic leadership, be it dean, provost, or president. Some invite outstanding women to lead them: the University of Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, and Harvard University, to name a few. Among approximately 80 national universities in Japan, only one has a woman at the top (Ochanomizu University, a women's university). Among Japan's private universities and colleges, the situation is not much different. Inviting someone from the outside to a top academic position is still exceptional, as it is in Japan's business sector.

But change is imminent. In 2009, the Japanese government will launch new programs in science and technology that join universities and research institutes in Japan with those in Africa. The program moves beyond simply inviting graduate students from Africa to Japan; it will promote joint bilateral research projects involving faculty and students.

Also, the Ministry of Education has submitted a budget beginning in fiscal year 2009 for an unusually ambitious program that increases opportunities for students to go abroad for a year as part of an exchange. The number of Japanese students who go abroad, even to universities in the United States, has fallen rapidly over the past few years (from 46,000 to 35,000). Reasons for this decline are unclear, but it comes at a time when meeting the future challenges in any country requires a circulation of human capital and resources that supports a vibrant international exchange of ideas and talents. The newly proposed exchange programs target 30 leading universities and aim to have at least 10% of all students study abroad within the next 5 years. The budget also requires that these universities offer many courses in English, which will hopefully attract non-Japanese students and faculty.

It is critical to approve this 2009 budget request because it will ultimately keep Japan economically robust and competitive. Otherwise, I fear that my country will become closed off from an increasingly interconnected global community, turning Japan back 150 years in its history to a time before Commodore Matthew Perry opened Japan to the world.

— Kiyoshi Kurokawa

10.1126/science.1161131

