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Class Dismissed

By Coco Masters

Hisashi Kubodera could have had his pick of universities. But the Japanese student, who speaks three languages and has an aptitude for applied mathematics, knew that getting a degree in his home country was the last thing he wanted — Japanese schools are just too easy, he says. Now a freshman at Yale, he recalls sitting in on a lecture at a Hokkaido-based college to get a feel for the place. The class was "so boring and terrible," Kubodera says, he can't even remember the lecture topic. "In Japan, if you get into college you can graduate no matter what," he says. "In the U.S., it's hard to get in and harder to graduate."

Kubodera may be an exceptional student, but his decision to seek higher education overseas is all too common among Japanese youth these days. Japan's universities have fallen on hard times, their reputations so dented that many ambitious students no longer consider them even as a last resort. Beset by international competition, hampered by outmoded curriculums and cloistered, change-resistant administrations, universities are seeing enrollment and tuition revenues decline. The total number of higher-ed students in Japan fell from 2.87 million in 2005 to 2.83 million last year, a loss of some 37,000, according to Japan's Education Ministry. Education experts say that nearly 40% of universities and colleges can't fill student quotas, forcing some schools to relax admission standards and others to merge or close.

This troubling trend is partially due to Japan's chronically low birth rate. The country's student body is shrinking. The number of 18-year-olds — a group that accounts for 90% of first-year college students — plunged 35% between 1990 and 2007, from 2 million to 1.3 million, according to the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Simply put, there are fewer and fewer Japanese students to support a system that was built for heavier class loads. As a result, Japan's famously Darwinian educational environment, in which high school students crammed day and night so they could beat their peers on standardized tests and get into good universities, is fading. Instead, even average students now breeze into colleges that are becoming less selective about who fills their hallowed lecture halls.

Educators have a phrase for this phenomenon: *daigaku zennyu jidai*, which literally means "an age when all are accepted to college." Big schools such as Tokyo University, which receives 40% of its funding from the government, are trying to goose head count by establishing more graduate schools and by adding postgraduate courses for working professionals and retirees. Smaller, underfunded colleges must take more drastic action. For example, Osaka University and Osaka University of Foreign Studies merged in October; two other Osaka schools — Kwansei Gakuin University and Seiwa College, both of which have been around for more than a century — are slated to combine next year.

The problems facing the country's higher-education system run deeper than mere demographics, however. Japan may be the world's second largest economy with a reputation for technological prowess, but its schools aren't making the grade. Critics say student bodies are stultifyingly homogeneous, teaching methods are obsolete, and there's a dearth of courses taught in English, the lingua franca of international education and commerce. "Japan's schools are third-rate by international standards," says Robert Dujarric, director of Temple University's Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies. In the 2007 *Times Higher Education Supplement*, an influential U.K.-based annual survey of universities all over the world, only four Japanese universities ranked in the top 100, compared with 37 from the U.S. and 19 from the U.K. "If your aim is a Nobel Prize in chemistry," Dujarric says, "you don't come to Japan."

This is another big reason why Japan is struggling to fill its classrooms. To offset dwindling enrollment, faculties need to reach out globally to attract foreign students as well as top-notch foreign teachers, who bring with them the ability to win lucrative research grants. But foreigners who opt to study in Japan sometimes regret their decision. Martin Rieger, a German attending Aoyama Gakuin University in central Tokyo, says that after one semester, he worries that he's falling behind his peers at his home university near Luxembourg. "I'm writing about topics and issues that will help no way in my future," says Rieger, 26. Bruce Stronach, president of Yokohama City University and the first Westerner to head a Japanese public university, says Japan is "not on the radar screen" of overseas students.

These problems are well known. Kiyoshi Shimizu, director general of the Education Ministry's higher-education bureau, acknowledged shortcomings in the system during recent meetings to establish an OECD-administered mechanism for measuring the performance of universities worldwide. Some schools are trying to adapt. In November, Tokyo University — or Todai, the 130-year-old "Harvard of Japan" — partnered with Yale to increase its visibility abroad. Tokyo University President Hiroshi Komiyama says he wants to double the proportion of graduate courses taught in English to 20%. (About 8% of Todai's students are foreigners, compared with an average of 3% for all Japanese universities and colleges.)

Another campus that's reforming is Tokyo's Waseda University. Four years ago, Waseda launched

a new School of International Liberal Studies as a testing ground for "enforced artificial internationalism," as Paul Snowden, the school's dean, describes it. All classes are taught in English. The school as a matter of policy recruits one-third of its students from overseas, from countries as far away as Iceland and Uganda. The strategy seems to be working. Since it opened, the program has seen enrollment grow at an annual average rate of 15%. "This school is dragging Waseda kicking and screaming into the 21st century," Snowden says.

But Japan is a country that clings to tradition and carefully guards its culture. Teaching in English and courting outsiders remains anathema to many faculty members and administrators. "The structure of universities and research institutes is so intransigent that it's hard to implement solutions," says Stronach, the Yokohama City University president. "These reforms are crucial right now, and yet there's an awful lot of dithering going on."

Japan dithers at its peril. Nations such as South Korea are building education systems geared to produce an internationally competitive workforce. "Our students need to globalize to be leaders," says Yuichiro Anzai, president of Keio University, a top private university in Tokyo. Do they have an international outlook today? "Not yet," Anzai says. "We are lacking a sense of the crisis that we face," says Akiyoshi Yonezawa, an education expert at the Center for the Advancement of Higher Education at Tohoku University in Sendai. "This society is becoming more and more disadvantaged year by year." For Japan, the "age when all are accepted to college" may turn out to be less carefree than it sounds.

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