

Reverse Japan's insularity

By GLEN S. FUKUSHIMA

Nine of the top 10 countries sending students to study at Harvard University, where I attended graduate school, have more students studying at the university now than 10 years ago. The only exception is Japan, where the number of students has declined. A decline in Japanese presence was also pointed out to me when I recently visited Stanford University, where I studied as an undergraduate, and appears to be a widespread phenomenon at American universities. What are the reasons for, and the implications of, such a trend?

One reason is that young Japanese are not interested in going abroad. Even those Japanese who have recently started to work at trading companies or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are less eager to study or work overseas than their peers of 20 or 30 years ago. Many young Japanese scholars believe they can obtain most of the information necessary to do their research through the Internet, and so they see little need to attend international conferences or go abroad for research. Japan has apparently become so safe, secure and comfortable that there is little incentive to go abroad, where one has to speak foreign languages, deal with peoples of other cultures and often engage in difficult negotiations or unfamiliar and competitive situations.

A second reason is that Japanese organizations, including companies, do not have the financial resources they had 20 or 30 years ago to send their employees abroad for extended periods of study.

A third reason is that some of the companies that still have the necessary resources have consciously decided not to send their employees to study abroad, especially to MBA programs at business schools. This is because many of the graduates of these programs have been hired away by foreign companies that often have a greater appreciation for this kind of education than do the Japanese companies that send the employees abroad to study.

Finally, recent Japanese applicants to selective American universities are less competitive than they were before. Applicants from China, India, South Korea and other countries, especially from Asia, are growing in both number and quality. In fact, these applicants often go through an intensively competitive process in their home country to gain eligibility to study in the top American universities, so they are highly motivated and competent in their areas of specialty as well as in the use of English. And, when they are accepted and enroll in American universities, they work hard and strive to achieve, since how well they do academically in the United States can affect their future career prospects. This is rarely the case for Japanese students.

When I visited Singapore and Malaysia last year, I learned that many youngsters from South Korea had come to study English in order to prepare to apply to universities in Australia, Canada, Britain and the U.S. The New York Times of April 27, 2008, carried a long article titled "Elite Korean Schools, Forging Ivy League Skills" that describes several private preparatory schools in South Korea that are providing intensive education in English to send their graduates to Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Princeton and other selective American colleges. Harvard has 37 Korean undergraduates, more than from any foreign country except Canada and Britain. Harvard, Yale and Princeton have a total of 103 Korean undergraduates. One of these prep schools requires mastery of two foreign languages besides English in order to graduate.

During a visit to Japan in March, Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust disclosed that in the 10-year period between 1999 and 2009, the number of Chinese students at Harvard had increased from 227 to 463, and the number of South Korean students had increased from 183 to 315. By contrast, the number of Japanese students had declined from 151 to 101. There were only five Japanese undergraduates enrolled at Harvard, and only one in the current freshman class.

This tendency of young Japanese not to venture abroad would be less of a problem if Japanese universities were world-class and Japanese society were truly global in accepting talent from around the world. However, the reality is that few Japanese universities are highly rated by international standards, and Japan still remains relatively closed to outsiders, even to highly trained professionals. This means that young Japanese who do not spend time abroad will miss the opportunity to experience the new insights, fresh perspectives and sense of discovery that can result from exposure to the stimulation, diversity, and competition found outside of Japan. In addition to limiting their perspective, not having overseas experience will make it harder for young Japanese to gain fluency in foreign languages and to establish the friendships and human networks that are becoming essential in this globalizing world.

What can be done to reverse the current Japanese trend of insularity? First, the Democratic Party of Japan leadership should explicitly encourage young Japanese to study abroad. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (Stanford), Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada (Harvard) and National Strategy Office Secretary General Motohisa Furukawa (Columbia) are among the DPJ leaders who have benefited from their study abroad. They should encourage young Japanese to follow their examples. Second, just as Japan has set targets to increase the number of foreign students who study in Japan (300,000 students by 2020), Japan should set targets to increase the number of Japanese students who study abroad. Third, additional funding should be provided to support promising Japanese high school and college students to spend one or two years studying abroad. Finally, schools and companies in Japan should create incentives to stimulate Japanese student to study abroad.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 ushered in the end of the Cold War. In the 20 years since then, globalization — of politics, economics, finance, business, technology, culture, education, etcetera — has been the single most important force affecting the lives of ordinary citizens around the world. It is ironic that, just as other countries are engaging more actively with each other to create networks of individuals, organizations and nations to enhance their well-being and prospects for the future, Japan is turning inward and fading from the world stage. Reversing this trend of insularity should be a high priority if the Hatoyama government wishes Japan to play the positive and constructive global role it has the potential to do.

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