

# A Long & Wrong Road to Globalization: Why Have Japanese Universities Failed in “Catching Up” in the Twenty-First Century?

*Takehiko Kariya*

*This essay examines how universities in non-Western, non-English-speaking countries respond to global competition in higher education, where English has become dominant due to “linguistic imperialism.” I pose critical questions about how these institutions can not only endure but thrive amid global competition, and whether intensified global competition has improved the quality of education. Focusing on Japan, I explore both successful and challenging aspects of globalization in its institutions of higher education. While Japan achieved success in adapting during the late nineteenth century, the emphasis on learning foreign languages, including English, diminished after World War II. The Japanese case illustrates the complex trade-offs between ensuring educational equity and global competitiveness, and highlights the evolving dynamics and challenges faced by universities as well as policymakers in non-English-speaking countries in the global higher-education landscape.*

Global competition in higher education has intensified during the twenty-first century. Governments and higher-education institutions across countries around the world are competing to survive by pursuing quality international students, faculty members, and external funding. Global rankings of universities, such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings, fuel the competition. There are clear advantages for institutions in English-speaking countries, particularly favoring the United States and the United Kingdom, partly because the value of English as a lingua franca is overwhelming in globalized economic competition. Thus, higher degrees obtained from top-ranked universities in English-speaking countries have become more valuable in the labor market beyond national borders, a situation sometimes referred to as the rise of a “global meritocracy.”<sup>1</sup>

Under the “linguistic imperialism” of English, however, how can higher education in non-English-speaking countries survive?<sup>2</sup> Has the global competition

enhanced the quality of education among those countries? What does “universalization,” or “Americanization,” of values in education mean to those in non-English-speaking countries? These questions are rarely scrutinized, in large part because of the taken-for-granted advantages in English-speaking countries.

To examine these questions, this essay focuses on Japan as a non-English-speaking country because Japanese experiences present an interesting case of success and failure in globalization, considering that Japan underwent two phases of accommodation to globalization in the process of modernization. In the early stage, Japanese higher education successfully contributed to adapting to the globalized world through “catch-up” modernization. In this stage, which commenced in the late nineteenth century, it was not difficult for Japan to accommodate higher education as a form of globalization, because catching up with the West provided unambiguous goals and measures for Japan. The Meiji government established higher-education institutions as a driving engine to power the catch-up. Their primary role, as I will discuss later, was learning the advanced knowledge and technologies valued in the West to establish a modern industrialized nation-state as rapidly as possible to avoid colonization by those same Western powers. Ironically, however, since the purported “completion” of the catch-up in the 1980s, both the government and higher-education institutions in Japan have been struggling. The problems come from the difficulty of setting new goals and discovering appropriate and effective measures to achieve these newly defined – but always rather vague – objectives.

What I herein call the *post catch-up syndrome* has emerged since the late twentieth century, and it is clearly evident in the globalization of Japanese higher education. I will argue that the syndrome and the suffering derive from, unexpectedly, Japan’s success in its earlier phase of globalization. What are the difficulties? And what has Japanese higher education won and lost, in terms of their educational values, through the global competition? By answering these questions, we get a sense of a broader story: the impact of the pressures of globalization on non-English-speaking countries that initiated modernization later than their Western counterparts. In doing so, it becomes easier to examine some of the problems raised by the globalization of higher education that are frequently overlooked in the English-speaking world: namely, contradiction between the importance of equality and waning diversity in values in education.

Japan is recognized as the first non-Western country that achieved modernization, and much earlier than other non-Western countries. While admittedly the process was complex, this historical experience for Japan is often coined as simply “catch up with the West” by Japanese intellectuals and leaders.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese leaders at that time modeled themselves on the advanced countries of Western Europe and the United States and strove to catch up through emula-

tion and innovation of Western modern systems.<sup>4</sup> In this early stage of modernization, education played a crucial role, especially the field of higher education. First, experts and advisors in many fields were brought from Western countries to teach Japan's best and brightest young men in non-Japanese, usually European, languages. During the 1870s, 200 to 800 foreign advisors were employed in government offices, military branches, factories, and public institutions, including higher-education institutions, with the peak of 858 advisors in 1874. Second, the Japanese government sent their smartest students to universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France to learn advanced knowledge and technologies. In total, approximately 550 students studied abroad for the first seven years of the Meiji Restoration, with 209 students going to the United States.<sup>5</sup> For these students to succeed, they required a high command of foreign languages, particularly English, German, and French.

Learning advanced knowledge from the West was a common practice across a range of countries that were "late" to modernize. In countries that had been colonized before independence, elites had (and still have) to learn the languages of their suzerain nations, and they often had to study advanced knowledge in those languages. Even in their domestic universities, the lack of textbooks and scholarly works available in their vernacular languages often made them rely on the languages of those suzerain countries, even until quite recently. In contrast, in Japan, vernacularization of Western advanced knowledge was realized in the very early stages of Japan's modernization. Amano Ikuo, an eminent historian of Japanese higher education, finds that within the first two decades after the commencement of modernization, Japanese young men who had studied abroad began to teach Western knowledge in Japanese to students in Japanese higher-education institutions, which were established and developed in the first three decades of modernization.<sup>6</sup> These Japanese then gradually replaced foreign teachers. Not only were lectures given in Japanese, but also most textbooks and many scholarly works were translated and written in Japanese for students and the wider public.

There are enormous differences between Japanese and Western languages in their scripts (compare Roman alphabets and Japanese hiragana, kanji, and kana), grammatical structures (for example, Japanese uses more particles without relying on word order, unlike English in which word order is crucial to help readers and speakers understand different parts of speech), phonics (certain sounds exist in Western languages, but not in Japanese, and vice versa), and semantic fields (untranslatable terms, phrases, and idioms), all of which makes it challenging for Japanese students when learning Western languages.<sup>7</sup> Despite these differences, the rapid Japanification of Western knowledge was a feat for this latecomer country in the globalized world during the late nineteenth century. In this regard, Japanese higher education successfully adapted to the globalizing world at the early stage of modernization. Avoiding being colonized also permitted Japan to take

advantages and learn from different Western nations. That is, they had time to determine what were the most suitable ways to establish modern institutions to emulate. This contrasts with former colonized countries in which the choice of models was influenced overwhelmingly by their suzerain countries. So, both language and non-colonization helped Japan establish hybrid modern institutions, including its higher-education system, by learning from different Western countries and blending these elements with Japanese tradition.<sup>8</sup>

This Japanification of Western knowledge can also be seen in the development of the so-called “translation culture” (*Honyaku Bunka*) in Japan. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* was translated into Japanese.<sup>9</sup> In the early twentieth century, more Western literature was translated for the literate public. The *Collected Works of World Literature* gained a huge readership in the 1930s. The anthology included well-known authors of English, French, German, and Russian literature, such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Goethe, Hugo, Zola, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, among many others. The publisher of this collection proudly announced that, in total, five hundred eighty thousand readers had reserved the series in advance of publication.<sup>10</sup> That interest shows the intense demand to learn, if the language barrier could be overcome. As another example, in the field of social sciences and Western thought, Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics* was translated in 1881, and Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* in 1924. Furthermore, the collected works of Marx and Engels were also translated into Japanese between 1928 and 1932: one of the earliest German translations.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to such rapid development of translation culture and scholarship, people who were educated completely in the Japanese language were able to access advanced Western knowledge, thought, and literature. Few other non-Western countries had such wide access to learning and higher education in their own languages at their early stage of modernization. Accordingly, unlike in other non-Western nations, where a strong cultural divide emerged between the elites and the public, divided by the language skills of the suzerain countries as well as the limited access to higher education, Japanification of Western knowledge mitigated an acute sociocultural divide in society.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that those responsible for these translations were Japanese intellectuals who had been educated at Japanese universities first, then often studied abroad. Japanese universities became incubators of Western knowledge, where translation and introduction of advanced Western knowledge were highly appreciated as scholarly pursuits. But since works were primarily borrowed ideas from the West, this style was given the sarcastic name of “translation scholarship” (*Honyaku Gakumon*), suggesting it made little contribution to the original works in Western languages. But, in fact, the translation scholarship produced a kind of hybrid knowledge by situating Western knowledge in the Japanese cultural, societal, and historical context, since translation is never simply a copy, but a modification: Western knowledge was framed and accommodated within the Japanese

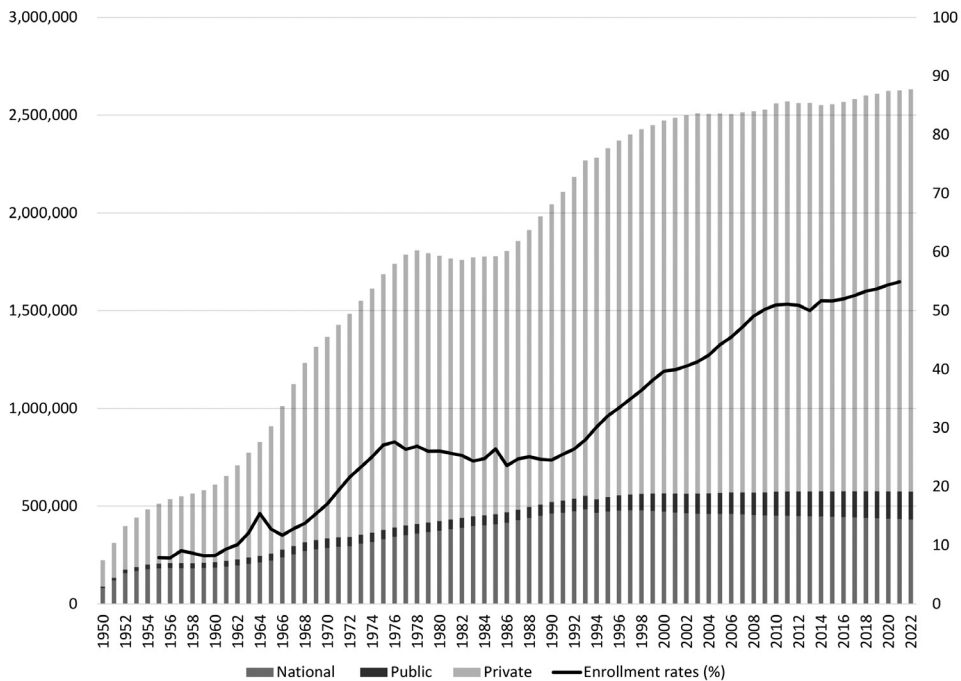
context. This role of universities in disseminating and transforming Western culture and knowledge into Japanese context should be recognized as an example of successful adaptation to the early stages of globalization for Japan, a society that was late to modernize. It was a profound achievement given its vastly different linguistic, cultural, and historical background from the West.

Paradoxically, however, the past success in globalization subsequently created a problem after translation culture and scholarship reached a higher level. Since the end of World War II, English has become the primary foreign language taught in Japanese schools, and this has generated profound problems with English education. Since the language of Japanese is vastly different from English, it is difficult for the majority of the population to learn English. Furthermore, after the Japanification of Western knowledge reached a higher level, the importance and necessity for Japanese people to learn foreign languages, including English, have become less obvious. Accordingly, speaking and listening skills in English or in other foreign languages were placed in the background. Admittedly, the importance of reading in English remains, but not as strongly as before.

Postwar educational reforms, hugely influenced by the U.S. military occupation, advocated democratic values. Democracy was to be realized, in large part, as a provision of equal educational opportunity. Establishing a more accessible educational system as well as eliminating gender discrimination were among the concrete policies. Junior high schools became coeducational and part of compulsory education, which resulted in a rapid expansion of educational opportunities beyond compulsory education. By the mid-1970s, more than 90 percent of junior high school graduates went on to senior high schools, which were also reformed to provide more enrollment opportunities for both male and female students. Higher-education reforms allowed national professional schools (which offered postsecondary technical training) to become universities after the war. Meanwhile, former “imperial universities” changed their status and name to become simply “national” universities. Two-year junior colleges were established, which enhanced access to higher-education opportunities for female students, to whom they mainly catered. Many of these institutions had been professional and vocational schools for women before the war, and a number would become women’s colleges and universities, although gender inequality in higher education has endured. Furthermore, newly established higher-education institutions, including universities and junior colleges, continued to increase steadily over the postwar period.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the junior college and university enrollment rate reached nearly 40 percent by the mid-1970s and has increased to 58 percent for four-year universities in 2023.

The increasing opportunities of university education have been led primarily by the expansion of private institutions, as shown in Figure 1. Approximately three-quarters of university students are now enrolled in private institutions, which

*Figure 1*  
The Number of Students and Enrollment Rates in  
Four-Year Higher-Education Institutions



Source : Author's graph of data from MEXT's School Basic Survey in each year.

account for 592 institutions out of 790 universities in total across Japan today. It is this expansion that made great contributions to Japan's economic growth domestically from the 1960s to the 1980s by helping minimize government investment in higher education, given the restricted government financial support to private universities.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, the Japanese catch-up model of university education succeeded in providing or "cramming" broad and higher-level knowledge into a large number of students in large lecture rooms in an economically efficient manner that placed minimum strain on the national budget. Intense entrance examinations, taken by a growing number of young Japanese students, also incentivized these masses to learn solid basic academic skills. During the high economic growth era in particular, the enhanced demand for well-educated white-collar workers, including engineers, was primarily supplied by graduates from private institutions.

Over the 1960s and 1970s, those university-educated workers thus became a driving force of “Japan, Inc.” With greater opportunities to enter (mostly private) universities, the generations who were educated during this period built a solid “middle class” in tandem with the continuous increase in household income afforded by strong economic growth. This societal transformation successfully created Japan’s self-portrait of its “all middle-class society” in the 1970s, where in Japan’s income distribution among households was much smaller as compared with other member countries of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) during that decade. By producing a large number of highly educated people in an economical way for the government, Japan established a stable society of residents who acquired a high command of literacy in culture, science, and technology, as well as social norms. Without the expansion of private universities, such a societal transformation would not have been achieved so smoothly.

A problem of trade-offs in education values emerges here, however. The success of the Japanese-language transfer of knowledge played a major role in achieving the expansion of educational opportunities, but equal access to educational opportunities clashed with the value of foreign-language education. The earlier success of globalization, which was limited to a few elite groups, is therefore inconsistent with the realization of equality as a democratic value in education. The question now becomes whether a new phase of globalization of education should be promoted at the cost of this democratic value. These contradictions – between the elitist and egalitarian values in education, and specifically in regard to foreign language education – are expected to occur more strongly in democratic non-English-speaking nations than in English-speaking countries.

In fact, in Japan, the expansion of educational opportunities challenged the value of English-language education. For example, the introduction of English-language education in the new compulsory junior high schools raised skepticism from the beginning about the significance of teaching English. Unlike the prewar elitist middle schools, all children in a given community began attending local junior high schools without entrance examinations. But soon after, teachers raised doubts about the value of teaching English. Aizawa Shinichi, a Japanese sociologist of education, analyzed the discourse of teachers in the 1950s to examine the process of introducing English-language education in newly established junior high schools. In his research, teachers reported that local people complained, “There is no use for learning English” for schoolchildren in their communities, and teachers were concerned that they could not explain the significance of learning English to the students. Teachers also pointed out that a foreign language (English) was a difficult subject to master for students with “low intelligence,” an unfortunate expression still widely used in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> It contrasted with the fact that foreign languages had been taught only to students in prewar middle schools and to female students who had been selected for admission to women’s high schools. It was estimated that

only about 25 percent of elementary school graduates enrolled in those prewar secondary schools.<sup>16</sup> The dearth of “learnability” of English became a major issue after the war. No agreement had been reached from the outset over the degree to which learning the English language should be expanded in compulsory education.

The perception that not everyone needs English and not everyone can learn a foreign language easily was shared by Japanese teachers half a century ago. A similar perception resonated with teachers in senior high schools and universities as well. The view expanded rapidly in the postwar period. In sharp contrast to the Meiji system that required elite students to be proficient in foreign languages, the rapid postwar expansion of upper secondary and tertiary education did not require advanced foreign language skills for students to attain admission, nor did these institutions provide quality language courses to enhance foreign language skills after students entered schools and universities. Even at the university level, many Japanese universities have failed to enhance students’ skills in speaking and listening in English. Again, this can be seen as a natural result of the Japanification of knowledge from abroad that no longer required the majority of students to learn English.<sup>17</sup> This is one aspect of a cluster that comprises what I call the *post catch-up syndrome*.

Against this backdrop, we gain new perspective as to why the number of Japanese students who studied abroad for tertiary education has declined in recent years, as shown in Figure 2.

The lines in the graph demonstrate that the number of Japanese students who studied abroad peaked in the early 2000s and has since declined both in the total number and for those studying in the United States. This is further evidence that domestic education in the Japanese language at Japanese universities satisfies the majority of young Japanese, even without providing high-level learning of foreign languages such as English, and/or obtaining globally valuable higher-education degrees abroad. In other words, as long as students pursue good jobs in the domestic labor market, Japanese universities provide enough opportunities for the majority of Japanese students, suggesting a very limited incentive to study abroad or acquire quality English skills.

Under the “linguistic imperialism” of English, however, weakness in English language abilities in Japanese universities has resulted in lower global rankings and reputations. Many Japanese institutions, particularly private institutions, simply accept this reality. As mentioned earlier, approximately three-quarters of universities are private, but not a single Japanese private university is among the top 600 universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) global rankings. Only four Japanese universities are ranked in the top 300, two of which are within the top 100, but those four institutions are all national universities that were once former imperial universities.<sup>18</sup> Put differently, although private universities established after World War II made a great contribution to the expansion of educational opportunities, most of these institutions failed, not only in producing globally reputed quality



Figure 2

The Number of Japanese Students Who Studied Abroad, 1983–2021  
(Excluding Short Stays)



Source: The data for the total number of Japanese students who studied abroad are from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's *Education at a Glance* annual reports. The data for students who studied in the United States are from the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* annual reports.

research but also in providing quality foreign language education. Here again, we find a conflict between successful globalization of universities and expansion of educational opportunities in a non-English-speaking country, where the clash centers on promoting wider access to university education in an indigenous language and gaining an edge in global competition for elites.

In August 1980, a high-profile blue-ribbon council in Japan composed of famous scholars and social critics under then Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi published a historic document. To the council members, the purported end of catch-up signified the end of Westernization. But what would come next for Ja-

pan? In their report entitled “Economic Administration in an Age of Culture,” the council stated: “Japan’s modernization (industrialization and westernization) and its maturation into a highly industrial society implies the end of any models involving the need to align to or to ‘catch up with.’ From now on, we need to find our own path to follow.”<sup>19</sup>

In the mindset of this council, the Japanese nation and people were required “to find [their] own path to follow.” Since education was deemed a driving force after the catch-up transformations, the government launched education reforms that provided a way for students, young citizens underpinning the state in the future, to find their own path. Education reforms in the following years proposed to deconstruct alleged defects in the catch-up model of education: a pedagogy of cramming and a centralized and uniform education system that had been put in place as the most efficient way to catch up.

The shift from the cramming type of teaching to a pedagogy that leads students to think for themselves has also been vocally advocated in higher-education circles. *Akutybu-rāningu*, a Japanese version of “active learning,” has been introduced to encourage more interactive communications between teachers and students to replace the past one-way cramming pedagogy. This reform was expected to enable Japanese to find “our own path to follow” by guiding students to learn how to think for themselves rather than just listening to lectures to acquire knowledge. However, contrary to the reformers’ intentions, according to a recent survey conducted by education researchers at the University of Tokyo, about 80 percent of classes, regardless of the subject, at Japanese universities remain lecture-based. And those lecture classes do not require students to work hard. The same survey found that between 70 and 80 percent of students at Japanese universities study less than six hours a week in preparation for classes.<sup>20</sup>

Although the government encouraged *Akutybu-rāningu* in university classes, another survey by the Benesse Educational Research & Development Institute revealed that approximately 80 percent of students prefer to attend traditional lecture-style classes, perhaps because of the lesser time and effort required of them.<sup>21</sup> As illustrated here, education reforms since the catch-up era ended have produced lower-than-expected outcomes. Moreover, the failure of these reforms has led the government to problematize the delay of globalization in higher education.

In addition to the pedagogical reforms, the Japanese government pointed to the “lag in globalization” of Japanese universities from the beginning of the 2010s. The proposal of the Cabinet Office’s Education Rebuilding Action Council published in 2013 stated:

The lag in globalization of universities is a critical situation. Universities are expected to create new knowledge based upon accumulated knowledge and become the core

initiators for social changes by taking on the unprecedented challenges Japan is facing. The revitalization of Japan's universities into places of continuous challenge and creativity is one of the major pillars for the "Rebirth of Japan," in which Japan will once again become more competitive in the world and regain its luster.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the recognition in the 1980s that catch-up was complete, we see in policy discourses the same catch-up mindset, though it now includes neighboring Asian countries as rivals, and the framing of the problems is explicitly linked to Japan's economic stagnation that has deepened since the early 1990s.

This problem has led to concrete policies such as the "Super Global University Support Program," which forced the nominated thirty-seven so-called super global universities to respond to globalization as rapidly as possible. One of the ambitious goals in the policy was to increase the number of Japanese universities within the top 100 in global league tables. While only two Japanese universities, the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University, ranked in the top 100 in the THE global rankings at the time, the government aggressively set its goal for ten Japanese institutions to place within the top 100 in ten years. This goal failed. Moreover, in socially constructing the problems in this way, the failure of university globalization was simply linked to the failure of the Japanese economy without any plausible evidence, which functioned to make universities a scapegoat in the wider political discourse.

As mentioned earlier, being a non-English-speaking country is a major handicap in global rankings. However, Japanese political leaders viewed Japanese universities' low scores of assessments on international criteria as evidence of the "lag in globalization." The THE rankings, for example, include a rating index called International Outlook, which is based on three criteria: proportion of international students, proportion of international staff, and proportion of international collaboration. The Japanese government compelled universities to improve on these criteria through the Super Global University Support Program policy, but with limited additional resources. To attract international students, for example, exceptional teaching in English is essential. For recruiting high-quality scholars from abroad, English-fluent environments in universities are necessary.<sup>23</sup>

However, few resources were made available to accomplish this. Though citations are emphasized and important in research, little support was provided for translation, and nominal pressure or incentive was put on faculty to publish internationally. For example, only a small number of Japanese researchers publish in foreign academic journals in the humanities and social sciences, compared to Japanese researchers who publish in foreign science and engineering journals. To improve the International Outlook criteria, the government leaders encouraged universities to increase the number of classes taught in English, but they failed to take aggressive financial measures to hire more foreign faculty members.

For Japanese universities, which have been teaching primarily in Japanese, it is not easy to improve on these criteria under resource constraints. The number of Japanese faculty members who earned degrees from universities abroad, especially in English-speaking countries, remained very small. While there are no national statistics available, even among the thirty-seven universities selected in the scheme of the Super Global University Support Program, only 7.6 percent of Japanese academic staff obtained foreign degrees, and 8.2 percent are non-Japanese nationals, two figures that undoubtedly overestimate the national average.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Super Global University Support Program produced very negligible improvements among Japanese universities on the THE International Outlook criteria. This result is related to the past success of Japanese universities, which contributed to the rapid expansion of educational opportunities and easier access to Western culture in Japanese. However, that once successful Japanification has depreciated the value of foreign language skills, obscured the necessity to learn English in particular, and become a huge obstacle for Japanese universities trying to engage in an English-language-based, elitist global competition. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the recent decline in the number of Japanese students who studied abroad has further intensified the “lag in globalization.” Despite efforts made by the government, the blurred incentive or pressure to study abroad and obtain high command of English language skills erodes the global competitiveness of Japanese universities. Nevertheless, for the majority of Japanese students, Japanese instruction in universities in Japan is acceptable, insofar as their main goal is to get a good job upon the completion of their studies.

**E**ach society has built its own higher-education system according to its own historical trajectories of modernization. Indeed, the original model for this was in Western Europe. However, non-Western countries, especially uncolonized nations, have escaped the strong influences from educational systems in suzerain countries and have created their own modern higher-education systems. In this respect, Japan’s experience in achieving vernacularization at such an early stage and on such a large scale is valuable from the perspective of its position within world history. Current global competition, however, appears to be depriving Japan’s higher education of its unique features, aspects which undoubtedly contributed to creating a stable, wealthy, culturally rich, and relatively equal society for much of the second half of the twentieth century.

To survive the challenges that accompany competition, higher-education institutions in non-English-speaking countries must increase the value of English as a medium of instruction without sacrificing the quality of educational content. However, such a shift from the systems that served them during the catch-up era has produced several contradictions in their education systems. In the case of Japan, as we have seen, the enhancement of English as a medium of instruc-

tion contradicts with equal access to educational opportunities. Such a contradiction between globalization and equal opportunity in education may not emerge in English-speaking countries to the same severe degree as it does among non-English-speaking countries. For this reason, these dynamics are often overlooked. While the widespread provision of higher education in Japanese has contributed to the expansion of educational opportunities, it has resulted in worsening quality of English language skills among students and faculty members, thus lowering the international reputation of Japanese universities in global rankings.

If we rush to resolve this contradiction by improving the International Outlook criteria, however, this will create a new hierarchy within the higher-education system. It will surely widen the gap between resourceful universities that can easily provide quality education in English by employing more faculty members with English-speaking backgrounds. In this respect, former imperial universities have a decisive advantage in receiving more financial support from the government. Yet other national universities, mostly local, and private institutions are far behind them (although exceptions exist, of course).

And this division is intensified by further prioritizing support for sciences and engineering, which are more likely to be evaluated globally. This focus gives a cold shoulder to the humanities and social sciences, whose publications in Japanese are less likely to be valued globally. The government has consistently provided more preferential treatment to sciences and engineering subjects because they are seen as more “useful” disciplines that contribute to economic growth. The widening divide between sciences and engineering versus the humanities and social sciences subjects also overlaps with the gap between national and private universities, as the latter are dominated by humanities and social sciences subjects.

The neglect of the humanities and social sciences in non-English-speaking countries will likely limit the potential contribution of those disciplines to diversify global knowledge production. In the case of Japan, Western-born ideas and thoughts were transplanted to Japan, a context far different from Western societies. The various gaps and contradictions between Japan’s reality and imported Western knowledge led to a struggle in the process of modernization and to many intractable problems. But, as a result, the humanities and social sciences scholarship that originated in Japan has obvious potential to bring about new developments – globally creative perspectives – thanks to their position as hybrids between Japan and the West. Just as diverse perspectives are understood as effective, productive, and valued within a single society, we need to recognize that diverse ways of perceiving problems and diverse approaches based on the experiences of each different society must be meaningful at the global level as well.

Unfortunately, most of the humanities and social sciences scholarship from Japan has been accessible only in the Japanese language. But the few works that do make it out, either translated or originally written in English, often reveal the

clear potential to challenge the dominance of Western-centric knowledge systems. Without falling into parochial nationalism, we need to go beyond the simplicity of rankings: making full use of knowledge originating, developed, and accumulated in non-Western countries – Japan and elsewhere – based on their past experiences of modernization, and thus create another axis to relativize the so-called universal values, which helps mitigate the unescapable influences of Eurocentrism. The groundwork of Japanese humanities and social sciences as hybrid scholarship can provide one such perspective, quite distinct from the West or even from postcolonial nations. Therefore, by walking a different path in the ongoing accommodation of globalization of higher education, Japanese universities can contribute to accumulating and diversifying knowledge without losing their historically unique legacy. For other non-Western societies, Japan's record provides a good example of how one society can recognize and understand its own hybrid legacy as a means of contributing to the diversification of human knowledge creation.

However, as this essay has shown, humanities and social sciences scholarship in non-English-speaking universities is in crisis under the contemporary forms of global competition, as it compels universities, regardless of their origins, to incorporate “universalization” into pedagogical values. How can universities in non-Western or non-English-speaking countries coexist with global competition without being swallowed up by these purportedly universal – that is, “Anglo-American” – values? Or is there no other option but to opt out of the global competition? The long and often wrong road to globalization traveled by Japanese universities by way of the catch-up era highlights the many challenges in the competitive world of higher education, as well as the wealth of possibilities we can use to address them.

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Takehiko Kariya** is Professor in the Sociology of Japanese Society at Oxford University. He is the author of *Education, Equality, and Meritocracy in a Global Age: The Japanese Approach* (with Jeremy Rappleye, 2020), *Education Reform and Social Class in Japan: The Emerging Incentive Divide* (2012), and “Credential Inflation and Decredentialization: Re-examining the Mechanism of the Devaluation of Degrees” in *European Sociological Review* (with Satoshi Araki, 2022).

ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Takehiko Kariya and Jeremy Rappleye, *Education, Equality, and Meritocracy in a Global Age: The Japanese Approach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2020); and Phillip Brown and Stuart Tannock, “Education, Meritocracy and the Global War for Talent,” *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (4) (2009): 377–392.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Takehiko Kariya, “Meritocracy, Modernity, and the Completion of Catch-Up,” in *Japanese Education in a Global Age: Sociological Reflections and Future Directions*, ed. Akiyoshi Yonezawa, Yuto Kitamura, Beverley Yamamoto, and Tomoko Tokunaga (New York: Springer, 2018), 287–306.
- <sup>4</sup> Imitation and innovation began before the Meiji Restoration. The Tokugawa shogunate imported limited Western knowledge through the Netherlands during the early nineteenth century. See D. Eleanor Westney, *Imitation and Innovation: The Transfer of Western Organizational Patterns to Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- <sup>5</sup> Ardath W. Burks, ed., *The Modernizers: Overseas Students, Foreign Employees and Meiji Japan* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985).
- <sup>6</sup> Ikuo Amano, “Daigaku Kōgiroku no Sekai” [The World of Printed Lectures Series], *Bulletin of the National Institute of Multimedia Education* 67 (2009).
- <sup>7</sup> The Foreign Service Institute in the U.S. Department of State lists Japanese as one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn, and vice versa.
- <sup>8</sup> See Westney, *Imitation and Innovation*.
- <sup>9</sup> Katō Shūichi and Maruyama Masao, ed., *Honyaku no Shisō* [Theories of Translation] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991).
- <sup>10</sup> Y. Yamamoto, “Enhon Būmu wo Kaidokusuru” [Decoding the Yen Book Boom], *Nihon Bungaku* 48 (1999): 43–53.
- <sup>11</sup> Maruyama Masao, “Marxism in Pre-War and Post-War Japan,” [in Japanese] (unpublished manuscript, 1963), <https://maruyamabunko.twcu.ac.jp/archives/search/bibliography/0365000000?sort=title&subpage=432&page=3&max=200&keyword=&andor1=and> (accessed February 26, 2024).
- <sup>12</sup> The literacy rate in Tokugawa, Japan, was higher than in contemporary European countries (see Ronald Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965]), which equipped a smooth modernization in Meiji, including establishing elementary schools rapidly. It contributed to improving people’s literacy further for them to read those translated works. The large readership enabled publishers to succeed commercially in selling translated books.
- <sup>13</sup> The educational system, characterized by a sharp pyramidal hierarchy, was largely maintained through the postwar educational reforms.
- <sup>14</sup> The rapid expansion of senior high schools over the same period also contributed to this success.
- <sup>15</sup> Shinichi Aizawa, “Japanese Educational Structure from the Perspective of Student’s Ability to Learn, 1957 to 1969: The Analysis of Educational Movement Discourse through the Case Study of English Teaching,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 76 (2005): 187–205.

- <sup>16</sup> Tokiomi Kaigo, *Nihon Kindai Kyōikushi Jiten* [Encyclopedia of Modern Japanese Education History] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1971).
- <sup>17</sup> A 2022 survey by Education First, a Swiss international education company, measures the English proficiency of people in 112 non-English-speaking countries and regions and finds that Japan is ranked 80th. “Japan’s English Proficiency Falls Further Among Non-English-Speaking Countries in 2022,” Nippon.com, December 8, 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01509>.
- <sup>18</sup> “World University Rankings 2023,” Times Higher Education, [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking#!page/o/length/25/locations/JPN/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking#!page/o/length/25/locations/JPN/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats) (accessed February 26, 2024).
- <sup>19</sup> Cabinet Councilor’s Office, ed., “Bunka no Jidai no Keizai Keiei Kenkyū Gurūpu” [The Age of Culture–Economic Administration Study Group] in *Ōhira Sōri no Seisaku Kenkyūkai Hōkokusho 7–Bunka no Jidai no Keizai Keiei* [PM Ōhira’s Policy Study Groups Report 7–Economic Administration in an Age of Culture] (Tokyo: Ministry of Finance Printing Bureau, 1980), 14.
- <sup>20</sup> “University Students Survey” [in Japanese], University Management and Policy Studies at University of Tokyo, 2018.
- <sup>21</sup> “A Survey on University Students’ Life and Learning” [in Japanese], Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> Cabinet Office, Executive Council for Education Revitalization, The Third Proposal [in Japanese], 2013. A similar policy discourse is found in the Democratic Party of Japan government’s report “The Promotion of Global Human Resource Development” [in Japanese], 2011.
- <sup>23</sup> In 2019, international students composed 3 percent of tertiary education enrollment in Japan (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average is 5 percent), while less than 6 percent of all faculty members in Japanese universities were non-Japanese nationals.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Kato, “Internationalization of Academic Staff in Japanese Universities” [in Japanese], *Annual Bulletin of GEORE* [Global Exchange Office for Research and Education at Gakushuin University] 7 (2021): 3–16.