

Deployment of the university version of the “100 sacks of rice” scheme



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The media reports on the global economic recession almost daily. The forecast decline of the Japanese GDP is quite severe among advanced nations and economic recovery is nowhere in sight. The future of pension systems and social security for senior citizens looks bleak as well.

Due to the advance of globalization and rapid computerization we have reached an era of world-wide mega-competition. Has the nation developed a solid strategy in order to deal with this new era even during these challenging times?

Much is said about budget strategies related to science and technology in Japan, but are these strategies actually playing a part in the overall national strategy? Perhaps these functions as minute situational tactics, and serve as policies to a small degree, but to define them as true national strategy is truly a stretch. I believe that what needs to be created in order for Japan to continue to prosper throughout the 21st century, and to contribute to global development as an advanced nation is a solid strategy that accurately focuses on the future.

The role played by universities is rapidly increasing in this knowledge-based society, and in order for Japan to stay on top of global competition and maintain positive growth, we need to remain innovative and keep up with cutting edge research development. To achieve this it is paramount that we foster and secure top-level human resources to carry out this task as well as high-level personnel to support them. In any case, the role which universities play is extremely large. Advanced countries, including China and Korea, understand the importance of universities and graduate schools, and proactively invest in education and research. Japan on the other hand has systematically reduced the budget for universities year-after-year. Clearly financial reform is necessary and we cannot allow universities to waste money, but is it wise to continually weaken the foundations of our universities and graduate schools which are the home of wisdom and the source of future advancement?

The National University Corporation will soon enter into its second period, and as part of becoming a corporate body, each university is carrying out proactive reforms. University presidents have also been encouraged to take on more leadership responsibilities and transmit information to the community. It is my opinion that curriculum reform and stricter requirements for graduation in regard to undergraduate, master and doctoral degrees are necessary. Furthermore, we should diversify the salary range for teachers and introduce a system by which teachers

who lack enthusiasm may be let go. Thorough reforms are needed, but governmental support should also be made available.

Up to this day, Japan has maintained a competitive position with foreign countries through a productive elementary and secondary education system, through diligence and high intellectual and technological levels. Japan has continued to grow while holding onto the idea that it was trying to catch up with other advanced countries. However, due to globalization, world-wide mega-competition and the current global economic recession, we are now entering an era where old methods and ideas are no longer useful. There are also issues and conflicts such as a rapidly aging population combined with a diminishing number of births, increased feelings of uneasiness and distrust of the government, swelling national and regional debt, as well as a lack of a sense of a common national goal among the people. Now, we must recreate current national strategies, and set policies to prepare for this new era. It is important to deal with current issues such as pension systems and social security problems, but does that mean we should forget to prepare for the future?

I believe that now is the time to concentrate on higher education policies, and focus our “national strategy” on strengthening our universities and graduate schools, and engage in proactive training of high-caliber personnel. In order for this to take place, further reduction of fundamental university budgets must be ended immediately, and competitive funds need to be enhanced. Even though we are experiencing severe financial conditions, we need to clarify the concept of university reform by establishing new laws such as the University Reform Promotion Law and the University Education Promotion Law. We should also create a new larger budget to provide strong support for universities and the educational system, and offer proactive support of university and graduate school education and research as part of a new “100 sacks of rice”^{*} plan from the budget of the entire Japanese ministries. University and graduate school policy is the national strategy for the future of Japan.

^{*}The story of the farsighted educator, Torasaburo Kobayashi, from Nagaoka, written in 1870 by the novelist Yuzo Yamamoto: to sell relief rice and build a school to invest in the future.

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