

# **National University Reform for the Coming Era**

Higher Education Bureau,  
Ministry of Education, Culture,  
Sports, Science and Technology-Japan

In June, we issued a notice on *Overhaul of Organization and Overall Operations of National University Corporations*. This was to aid the process to develop the *Third Medium-Term Objective/Medium-Term Plan for National University Corporations*, which will cover a six-year period beginning in academic year 2016. The notice is based on progress made during the period of the second medium-term objectives – in particular the *period of accelerated reform* between fiscal year 2013 and 2015 – and growing societal demands on national universities.

## **Societal Role of National Universities**

So what are the society's expectations for the national universities? Today Japan faces enormous challenges as society transforms rapidly and on a global scale: shoring up Japan's competitiveness in the world; raising industrial productivity; producing scientific and technological innovation; developing human resources capable of tackling globalization; establishing disaster countermeasures that take advantage of Japan's experience with major earthquakes; tackling global warming and other environmental problems; overcoming the problems of an ageing and shrinking population; revitalization of local communities; and development of young people who can succeed in the modern world full of such challenges.

Social transformation is also behind the ongoing ministry-wide efforts of MEXT on reforms for a smooth transition from upper secondary to tertiary education. Not only society but also occupations are likely to be dramatically different in the future. In such an environment, cultivating *true competencies to learn* which enables students to live through the coming era will be impossible if we simply continue education in current styles. University education will also require a qualitative overhaul. In planning and implementing such an overhaul, universities should review whether goals for student achievement were clarified, degree awarding policies were set accordingly, and organizational structures were established to ensure distinctive education and research. Universities have a social responsibility to innovate the methods and content

of education in accordance with these societal changes.

Some national universities have already begun to tackle such challenges in a proactive manner. Utsunomiya University, for example, is preparing to reorganize part of its education and engineering faculties\*, in order to create a new faculty aiming to develop human resources capable of handling multi-layered and composite local community challenges, including the social system, urban development, and disaster prevention/reduction. The new faculty will make problem-solving training compulsory. In this training, students from multiple departments will collaborate on field work in the local community. The new faculty will also introduce active learning to all specialized subjects. The University of Tokyo plans a scheme that aims to develop human resources with the skills to utilize knowledge from broad perspectives that overlook *humans* and *society*, instead of those who study only within the restricted realm of the specialized disciplines, by merging the current four literature departments into one.

Other universities are also taking measures to develop human resources with a broad range of knowledge and ability, to meet the social needs and utilizing its unique resources. They are forming integrated knowledge through linking natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, thereby transcending the boundary between “humanities” and “sciences”, which has long existed in Japan. They are also creating new academic faculties that can contribute to globalization efforts and regional revitalization. After the *redefining of the missions\*\** was completed in FY2013, a total of 15% of all departments, or 226 departments (of which teacher training, humanities and social sciences account for 89) were reorganized or are being planned to be done so by FY2016. Tokyo University of the Arts and Hitotsubashi University are moving ahead with plans to use their strengths to partner with foreign universities and create international education and research centers. MEXT is eager to encourage such promising movements towards reform.

### **Why were the Teacher Training/Humanities/Social Science faculties and graduate schools addressed to be reorganized in particular?**

Some interpretations among the public concerning the Minister's notice are: “*The message is that humanities and social sciences faculties and graduate schools ought to be scrapped and transformed to that of natural sciences, which are more necessary for society*”;

*“MEXT places emphasis only on practical sciences of immediate utility and thinks humanities and social sciences are unimportant”;*

*“MEXT thinks that academic disciplines related to the humanities and social sciences are not needed for national universities.”*

***All of the above are in fact untrue.*** Each academic discipline in the humanities and social sciences plays an important role in reflection on human activities, social events, and social values; in the building and improvement of the basis for people's livelihoods; and in analyzing social events. The importance of versatility cultivated by liberal arts education is indeed growing in an era that calls for the autonomous ability to seek out solutions to problems without definite answers.

At teacher training universities and faculties, we are meanwhile working to raise teacher quality while reducing student quotas, based on factors such as expected demographic dynamics and teacher demand. To that end, we already have a policy to "abolish" courses in the teacher training universities and faculties which do not focus on acquisition of a teacher certificate.\*\*\* From now on emphasis will be placed on teacher training courses and the issue is to raise teacher quality.

Academia and society have pointed out that humanities and social sciences have had specialized disciplines that are overly segmented and that more could be done in education so that students can better acquire skills to survive out in the world, for example by increasing self-study hours and enriching liberal arts education. These points bring up the need to further clarify goals for human resource development and organize the curriculum as well as the organizational structure of the universities in order to meet those goals.

This is why the recent notice takes up teacher training universities/faculties, humanities, and social sciences in particular, while calling for national universities to review all of its organizational structure, regardless of discipline.

We would like each university to tackle in a proactive manner shifting to areas of high social need by reorganizing undergraduate and graduate programs, in order to enhance further the quality of education and research. Academic, scientific, technological research and education opens up unknown worlds, and we would in fact like to receive proactive proposals that are ahead of social needs. Each university is

expected to implement the strategies and plans for the overhaul, which they will develop based on what each university had reconfirmed as current or future roles of its programs.

National universities exist alongside society. Their stakeholders are the entire nation. How should the university education in the new era be formed? Each national university should gather wisdom and contemplate on this point. Considering the dramatic social transformation occurring today, national universities must change on their own in order to maximize their *knowledge creation function as engines of social change*. Since creating the *National University Reform Plan* in November 2013, MEXT has worked with each national university to enhance their strengths in order to turn them into national universities that can squarely face the new needs of the coming era in a way that accords with each university's strengths, distinctive characteristics, and roles in society. MEXT hopes all national universities will continue such efforts, and will actively support them.

\*Throughout this document, the term “*faculty*” and “*faculties*” refer to undergraduate program/programs.

\*\*As a starting point for national universities to further enhance their strengths, a series of discussions between each national university and the MEXT were held in FY2012-FY2013 to “*redefine the missions*”, or reconfirm each university’s strengths, distinctive characteristics, and roles in society.

\*\*\*After FY 1987, part of the courses in national teacher training universities and faculties had been transformed to courses whose main objective is not teacher training.