

**Statement from the Executive Board of Science Council of Japan
to Express our Sincere Appreciation for the Support and Approval towards the
“ Statement on the Future Direction of the University: In Relation to the
Departments/Graduate Schools of Teacher Training,
and Humanities and Social Sciences”
and the Proposal for Nationwide Consensus towards University Reform
15th October 2015.**

1. Developments in the Wake of the Debate on Issues Regarding the Progress of Humanities and Social Sciences and a Request by SCJ

Following our “Statement of the Executive Board of Science Council of Japan On the Future Direction of the University: In Relation to the Departments/Graduate Schools of Teacher Training and Humanities and Social Sciences”¹, issued on 23rd July in response to the notice from The Minister of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), we have received a message from International Social Science Council (ISSC) and many other messages and comments from various Japanese scientific societies as well as overseas organizations. We would like to hereby offer our appreciation for the expressions of support shown by the majority of these bodies for the position outlined by the executive board in the following statement:

the HSS² make an essential contribution to academic knowledge as a whole. The HSS are also entrusted with the role of solving – in cooperation with the natural sciences – contemporary problems domestically as well as internationally. In this light, the ministerial request to take ‘active steps to abolish organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs’, with its specific focus on the HSS, raises a number of alarming questions.

The Minister and MEXT have recently taken every opportunity to emphasize that there are differences between the concerns of universities regarding the notice and the intentions of the Minister and MEXT. The Director General of the Higher Education Bureau of MEXT attended the Executive Board meeting of SCJ on September 18th to explain this matter, and presented a document entitled “National University Reform for the Coming Era”³. The document expressed a refutation by MEXT of the following interpretation of the notice:

¹ Material of Science Council of Japan, <http://www.scj.go.jp/en/pdf/kohyo-23-kanji-1e.pdf>

² HSS: Humanities and Social Sciences

³ Material of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/1362381.htm>

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.

In order to illustrate this point, the document explained how the word “abolish” in the notice referred only to abolishing those so-called “New Courses”, in the teacher training universities and faculties, which do not focus on the acquisition of a teaching license. It also requested each university to tackle in a proactive manner the shift in their focus to areas of high social need.

The Executive Board of SCJ understands the points that MEXT wishes to make by these clarifications. It is difficult, however, to understand the notice in the way that MEXT claims it ought to be read. It has not dispelled the feelings of anxiety or doubt felt by many people, both in Japan and overseas over the Japanese higher education administration’s plans for HSS, as has been witnessed in the media coverage. Therefore, we would like to request that MEXT explain their intentions more thoroughly henceforth.

2. Recognition of the Problems facing Higher Education Facilities

Moreover, from SCJ’s perspective, it is vital to make full use of this opportunity to improve and strengthen higher education in Japan, in the light of the many important issues concerning higher education in Japan which have taken center stage as a result of the notice and the ensuing debates.

While we have been discussing this issue, two more researchers in Japan have been awarded Nobel Prizes this year, for Medicine and Physics respectively. This news is proof of the high achievements of scientific research in Japan, as well as the wealth of talent here. In fact since 2000, Japan’s haul of Nobel Prizes for science is second only to that of the United States. This can also be seen as an endorsement of the hard work put in by industry, academia and the government as well as the public support for scientific research and nurturing young researchers. There is, however, great concern across the whole spectrum of society that the deterioration of research and education circumstances in Japan in recent years may bring about the degradation of its international reputation for higher education, at a time when scientific research is rapidly becoming more globally competitive.

SCJ finds the significant problems facing Japanese higher education to be as follows:

First of all, the necessity for raising the quality of teaching and research, which we mentioned in regard to HSS in item 6 of our previous Statement, should not be considered to be confined to the field

of HSS. The problems that remain to be tackled in Japan exist across all the fields, including not only HSS, but also life sciences, natural sciences and engineering. The present problems in human resource development include issues such as coping with globalization, defining learning outcomes, choice of evaluation methods and building curricula for both undergraduate and graduate programs which are appropriately composed of liberal arts and specialized subjects.

In addition, there is still a lack of mutual understanding in our society about the relationships and differences between the basic, applied and practical forms of research. We must therefore accelerate the reforms to deal with these problems and strengthen higher educational institutions as hubs for international research and education. In this way we can help both Japanese and international students to be aware of their educational goals and achievements, foster the kind of human resources society truly needs, and more effectively employ the fruits of our research achievements for the betterment of society.

Secondly, since this notice was a request sent by MEXT in relation to the contents of the Third Mid-Range Target and Plan, which each national university is obliged to prepare for, it has drawn public attention to the way in which National Universities' Management Expenses Grants (NUMEG) are allocated. If we wish to provide at least enough time for voluntary reforms to be carried out, it is vital to secure government funding for a sufficient period, whether in terms of NUMEG, governmental subsidies for private universities, or other governmental supports for higher education, such as research grants for university science and technology researchers. In particular, the recent trend of an annual 1% reduction of NUMEG has begun to cause serious obstacles in education and research in universities. As a result, problems such as the stagnation of essential reforms and the difficulties of sustaining the appointment of promising young researchers, have already been observed. Therefore, in order to avoid these problems it is necessary, even in the midst of the current financial hardships, to secure a national consensus to provide the fiscal resources to enable reform.

Thirdly, university reforms should not restrict their aims to the promotion of human resources specializing only in the field of practical knowledge. Rather they should try to strike the right balance, between a broad liberal arts education and specialized expertise, which is required for success in the global era. This point has been underlined by a number of organizations, including representatives of both academia and the business community. For instance, the Japan Association of National Universities made this point in their latest document entitled "An Action Plan for the Future Vision of National Universities" (September 14th, 2015). Similarly, Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) responded to MEXT's notice by stating that "it is important that students acquire knowledge in their specialized fields as well as an understanding of the diversity of culture and society through broad experiences including studying abroad" (A View on National University Reform, September 9th 2015, Keidanren). Therefore, it is essential to reach broad consensus on the future of universities through

dialogues not only within academic circles but also with business circles where most university graduates work.

3. Proposals for University Reform in Japan

Based upon the considerations above, SCJ will continue our deliberations towards making a recommendation about the future of universities to the previously established ‘Committee for considering the future of national universities’ research, education and government funding from the viewpoint of the promotion of Science’.

We also think that it is necessary to reveal the major discussion points before our final recommendations are released in order to promote a nation-wide debate about what kind of higher education system we need to produce world class human resources and outstanding research achievements. Therefore, in order to demonstrate our commitment to play an active part in this process, we propose the following measures respectively for academic related organizations ((1), (3)), and the Government ((2), (4)), _

- (1) A Forum for open discussion and agreement should be set up jointly by universities and academia as well as industry and the general public. This forum should be used to debate the question of how universities should reform their curriculum and internal structure so as to be more attractive not only to graduates of high schools or colleges of technology, but also mature students. It should also consider how to make university research results, at the basic, applied and practical stages, more conducive to the development of society. Finally it should consider how to make universities more attractive educational and research organizations to international students and researchers in the global era.
- (2) Insofar as it is possible, the Government should strive to both respect the results obtained from the discussion in the Forum mentioned above and to put them into practice. Once this is done, it should stimulate a nationwide debate over how to allocate fiscal resources, in the current context of severe budgetary strain, to the various expenditures imposed by our ageing society, whether it be pension and health care or supporting the next generation, such as through the provision of higher education.
- (3) Regardless of whether a university is national, public or private, each university should engage in the discussion positively and put the obtained results into practice.
- (4) The government should enhance its fiscal support to universities so as to provide the necessary environment for voluntary reform to be carried out by each university while these discussions and reforms are ongoing, in other words until about six years from now, which point will mark the

completion of the 3rd Mid-Range Target and Plan of national universities.

SCJ is aiming at improving and sustaining human resource development and scientific research in Japan through achieving the proposals above.

15th October, 2015

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