



A Bird's Eye View of Japan

by Susan A. Bird

I spent the month of July in Japan as one of six international educators awarded Fulbright grants under this year's International Education Administrators (IEA) Program.

We were there to learn about Japan, and education in Japan, in the broadest sense. One of the criteria used for selection for this particular Fulbright Program was that participants must not have had extensive experience in Japan. I certainly fit that description. While my university had been involved in an exchange program with a Japanese university for some years, the exchange had always remained small-scale and was difficult to administer.

Four weeks is not a long time to observe any country, even though our program was extremely charged and included a tremendous variety of experiences.

We visited the most prestigious national and private universities; *senmon gakko* (specialized two-year schools); American branch campuses; junior colleges; public schools at the elementary through secondary level; "cram schools," where students take extra classes in their quest for admission to the best possible university; and even a preparatory school for tiny tots, aimed at assuring their acceptance into the "right" kindergarten!

We also visited the *Monbusho* (Ministry of Education) and a number of enterprises where education/training is carried on in the private sector. We even met with a delegation of rice farmers who were eager to discuss their economic problems!

I would never claim to be an expert on any aspect of Japanese education. But I learned a great deal and can venture some observations.

Everyone we met in Japan talked about the importance of international education and how much Japan needed and wanted to develop that aspect of

higher education. My strongest impression is that higher education in Japan is in a state of flux, and that internationalizing the system is only one aspect of what is occurring.

The shapers of educational policy are sensitive to charges that once students have been accepted into a university, they find little to interest them or to cause them to devote much time to their studies. The real value of the university experience in Japan seems to be to form friendships and make all-important personal connections for future success.

Higher education remains very much rote memorization. Classes are large, students are anonymous, and women are under-represented as students, faculty members and administrators, and face discrimination when they are represented. The homogeneity of Japanese society, as reflected in its student body, is a handicap for Japan in its desire to continue to be a market and political superpower in the 21st century.

By the year 2020 it is expected that there will be a shortage of qualified high school graduates. The problem is not exactly numbers, but students of high quality. Like their American counterparts, Japanese universities do not want to simply dip down a little lower in the barrel to recruit students who are less qualified. The alternative is one that U.S. universities discovered some time ago: make their institutions even more desirable and sought-after, in order to continue attracting the cream of the student crop.

This effort will require updating their curriculum, recruiting some previously spurned populations (such as Japanese educated abroad, and adult learners), and enrolling increasing

numbers of non-Japanese students.

Another factor is the recession in Japan. Students are finding that graduating from even the most prestigious universities does not automatically guarantee a job. As one young professional told me ruefully, "When I was a senior at "x" five years ago, I didn't even bother to fill out job applications. Recruiters called me at home, and I would say to each one 'well, what can you offer me?' Now my younger brother is graduating from the same university, and he has filled out 130 applications and has had just two interviews."

Universities are feeling pressure to make their education more valuable in order to respond to the weak economy, and this means internationalizing the curriculum and, by extension, the students themselves.

Because of these concerns, Japan is doing some serious thinking, planning and acting in order to change the higher education system. This will not be easy—Japan is extremely proud of the system, which has served the country well for the last half of this century.

Also, Japan is burdened by a ponderous bureaucracy, where decisions about all aspects of education are made by the *Monbusho*. Individual institutions have a minuscule amount of autonomy, as compared with American institutions, and this is true at every level. Thus, change is achieved slowly.

When the *Monbusho* in 1987 embarked on a policy of increasing foreign students in Japan, all the universities fell into step. At the moment, I don't think that international students are seen as a source of additional income so much as they are viewed as an excellent way to diversify the university population and allow Japanese students to have access to groups of people they might otherwise never meet.

The *Mombusho's* plan to attract 100,000 foreign students by the year 2000 has already been half achieved. However, Japanese administrators are quick to point out that the increase has come from students from China, Korea, and other Asian countries, perceived by the Japanese as only minimally "foreign."

To many Japanese, "foreign students" means only Americans, Europeans, or Latin Americans.

Other Asians, though certainly not considered as Japanese, are perceived as coming from such similar cultures that they will not do much to internationalize Japanese universities. This is probably how Canadians from all provinces, except Quebec, are perceived at American universities.

The number of Americans going to Japan to study is still small, and most are on short-term exchange programs. They are not enrolled in four-year undergraduate degree programs, as are most of the Asian international students.

With only about 1,200 Americans studying in Japan this year, it is difficult to reach a critical mass where problems can be solved more easily.

American students in exchange programs report difficulties beginning with the visa process. In order for the host university to issue the certification which allows the international student to apply for a Japanese student visa, not only must the student present certification of funding and a complete school history beginning with primary school, but a financial guarantor must be found in Japan. This person is responsible for the student should anything go wrong during the student's stay in Japan, so it is an obligation which cannot be assumed lightly. Obviously, it is difficult for an American student to find such a person. Some Japanese universities are beginning to have their international student office act as the guarantor, but not all can or will do so.

The fact that few American students study at most Japanese universities also creates scheduling problems for them. They cannot always take the "regular" courses taught in Japanese

as a foreign language, because they will be mixed in with Asian students who already have a familiarity with the writing system, or whose focus in the course is Japanese for Academic Purposes—the Asians being prepared to be mainstreamed into a Japanese university at the earliest opportunity. But there are often not enough Americans for the university to afford to create a separate language program.

Apart from the language classes, filling in a student's program is equally troubling. Students who are at level II or III in Japanese cannot sit in classes alongside native Japanese speakers and learn much. But there is not a large enough group to create a parallel curriculum.

I spent a fair amount of time at universities talking with women, and I have also counseled Japanese women students who studied at my university and then had serious conflicts about returning home.

It is difficult to make valid assumptions on the status of women when one is not part of their society. On the surface, however, it appears that women still experience difficulties in gaining equal access to opportunities, and are expected to accept a position as second-class citizens.

Traits of modesty and self-effacement are highly prized, and much emphasis is placed on physical beauty and maintenance of a slender body. Many young women who had spent time abroad confided how difficult it had been to re-enter Japanese society, forced to re-fit themselves into a mold they no longer valued. They also were suspected of being "tainted" by their experience overseas and felt they had to be twice as silent, unassuming, supportive, and non-assertive as they had been before leaving home.

Young women, both those who had studied abroad and those who had not, also complained that as difficult as it was for young men to find jobs in the current economy, it was ten times as hard for them as women. One said bitterly, "The boys complain about the small number of interviews granted, but we have not even been permitted to send in applications yet

this year."

It is still common for young professional women to find that their role includes passing the sushi at corporate receptions; several young women said that their employment contracts included a clause stating that whenever they married, they were required to resign.

At one super-conglomerate, we met with the manager of the human resources department, a charming and urbane man who had spent many years in Canada and in the U.S. He informed us that of the approximately 9,000 people his company employed in Japan, 1,400 were women—all in clerical positions. One member of our group pointed out that a great deal of very capable human resources was being wasted in his company's treatment of women, and he agreed.

International women studying in Japan experience some of the problems of Japanese female students, but they are also exempted from many restrictions by virtue of their foreign status. Everyone knows that foreigners do not comprehend and cannot be expected to follow the rules of Japanese society, so Western women are given a great deal of freedom. When I met with two students on my own school's exchange, both were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences in Japan. They had made good friends, improved their Japanese language skills dramatically, and were sorry to leave.

I have concluded that exchange programs with Japan have excellent promise, so long as one is realistic about the potential pitfalls. We need to do everything we can to encourage American students to look to Asia rather than Europe as a destination for study abroad. And as more and more students do study in Japan, the numbers at individual universities will reach that critical mass needed to organize programs aimed at the special needs of Western students. ■

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