

Regarding the Plan to Accept International Students

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留学生受入れを考える

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要 旨

1983年に打ち出された「留学生10万人受入れ計画」により、日本への留学生は増加し、目標数を達成した。2008年には「30万人受入れ計画」が提唱されたが、その実現には大学関係者から疑問の声が多数あがっている。こうした中、3月に東日本大震災および福島原発事故が起き、多くの外国人が帰国したり来日を取り止めたりしている。そのため、定員割れの日本語学校も出ており、この影響は早晩大学にも及ぶであろう。

そもそも、実現を疑問視されていた30万人計画である。震災後の現況を鑑み、計画を再検討することが必要ではなかろうか。小稿では、留学生受け入れのあり方について考える。

【キーワード】 留学生30万人受入れ計画, 再検討, 震災, 安全対策: Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students, Reconsideration, Disaster, Safety measures

1. Introduction

In 2008, the “Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students” was proposed as part of the strategy for “GUROBARU-KA (translated from Globalization)”. By accepting 300,000 international students, Japanese universities are expected to become more open. When the plan was proposed, the figure of 300,000 shocked the people concerned with international students. There were arguments about it, both pro and con. Most of them were against the plan. I am one who criticized it. It seemed to me to be a unrealistic plan because the number of international students that the government wanted to receive was incredible. This is not a feasible number. I saw the plan to be impracticable. A large number of people like me involved in international students’ education do not understand why should accept 300,000 international students. The Japanese government believes that the growth of the international student population would globalize universities. Will the outcome achieve the expected result?

Every Japanese today realizes that Japan is not the same after the earthquakes in the Tohoku district. In view of the current state of affairs, should we reconsider the plan? In this paper I will point out the plan’s defects and give my view on its overall worth.

2. The impact of the disaster in the Eastern Japan

After the disaster in the Eastern Japan, many foreigners left Japan. According to The Ministry of Justice, about 60,000 international students then returned between March 12

and April 1.

Many Japanese language schools received heavy damage. Schools in both Eastern and Western Japan were subjected to severe financial pressure. The April 8 edition of NHK TV news reported that a certain language school in Tokyo had only 20 students for the new term in April. This school had been scheduled to accept 130 students. Some teachers at the other language school that my friends run in Tokyo are very concerned that they will be able to survive. This school had about 200 students and half of them finished school in March. Over 1/3 of the other enrolled students returned to their countries in fear of the earthquakes and nuclear problems. More than 80% of them were Chinese. The school expected to receive about 100 new students in April but over 50 students canceled entry by the end of March. A language school as far away as Osaka, was impacted by a rumor about nuclear power plant accidents in Fukushima. The headmaster of this school gave a description of the deteriorating enrollment condition in the newspaper. These are not special cases.

Many university students also have left Japan and a considerable number of foreigners canceled entry even though they successfully completed their entrance examination. Luckily, about 90% of students who evacuated from Japan came back to continue studying at university. However, international students will not increase in the future. In our university located in the Hokuriku area, some exchange students returned while some research students canceled entrance. The international students seem to be staying away from the Western part of Japan even though the influence of radioactive contamination is insignificant compared to that in the Eastern part of Japan.

Taking a look at the disaster as a whole, a number of foreign workers also returned home. New international trainees and probationers from China are afraid of radioactive contamination and as a result they do not want to come to work in Japan. Consequently, a number of companies and farms that depend on foreign workers are threatened by the deteriorating business situation. They have been forced to revise their manpower strategy. It seems obvious to me that the plan of accepting many more international students needs some serious revisions under these circumstances.

3. A brief history of accepting international students

In 1983, the Japanese Government suggested the "Plan to Accept 100,000 International Students". To promote the plan, centers called RYUGAKUSEI CENTER for international students' education were started up in the 1990's by a ministerial order directed at national universities with enrollments of over 200 international students. These centers have been the mainstays of Japanese language and culture education for international students. Through these centers, the educational support for international students was gaining a solid footing. As a result, the number of centers grew yearly and the plan was

realized in 2003. Overall, the plan could be considered a success even though some problems still existed. The problem was that while international students increased, the relative number of excellent students did not. Moreover, the growth of international students created other problems.

When the “Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students” was proposed in 2008, it seemed to me that it was a superficial plan because the target number was totally unrealistic. There was no evidence to support this number. And there was no analysis to understand the consequences if this was a wrong decision. Many people engaging in international students’ education questioned why we needed 300,000 international students. It seems to them that the size of number was the main consideration and outweighed any other consideration.

Looking back over a span of 20 years, the supposition is the Japanese government did not carry the plan into practice because of the fact that a magnitude 9 earthquake occurred. This is an unproven premise that would be hard to substantiate with analysis. We did not anticipate that an accident at a nuclear power facility would occur and our people are frightened by radioactive contamination. Our government needs to fundamentally review existing disaster prevention and containment measures.

4. Pending matters

Some problems created by the acceptance of international students were not solved even though the goal of increasing the international students was carried through. Matters and situations are different in each university. With reference to the University of Toyama, my evaluation was that the language and culture education was quite solid. But there still exist some research students and graduate students who will not take Japanese lessons even though they think that the Japanese language is necessary for living and surviving in Japan. Mostly, fields of their study are in engineering or science and students are heavily occupied with experiments and intense studies. It is not unusual for them to study at laboratory until midnight. They have little time for Japanese lessons. Besides, there are cases where some academic advisers do not have a deep understanding of the importance of learning the Japanese language. They believe that international students should finish their studies only in English. To my way of thinking this is odd and unproductive approach. The language barrier will cause difficulty dealing with day-to-day living and create isolation. This is Japan and we, Japanese people, communicate with each other in Japanese. It is impossible for students to promote friendship with Japanese people unless they understand Japanese language.

A requirement that guaranteed international students living space in a rented house or room created a problem. In Japan we must secure a Japanese co-sponsor when we rent an apartment. For international students, finding a co-sponsor is extremely difficult. This

problem was solved in 2002, thanks to the support of the local communities and various supporting organizations and associations that always look out for and assist international students. International students now can rent an apartment without having a Japanese citizen act as their surety. Nevertheless, the best housing solution is to provide dormitory space with reasonable rents. Ideally, all students should be able to rent a place in a dormitory.

The risk & crisis management analysis is incomplete. My concern is the safety of students and a comfortable life for them in Japan. Since I believe that prevention is better than having to find a cure, I provide them with orientation sessions to learn and adjust to the Japanese way of life and help them avoid misunderstanding and criticisms by the Japanese. I want them to be liked by the Japanese. However, not all international students can participate in the orientations because they are conducted in Japanese.

Many Japanese people have the mistaken idea that the words of “globalization” or “internationalization” mean speaking or understanding “English”. In the University of Toyama, over 60% of the international students are from China and we do not have English-speaking people as students. There are Chinese research students who do not understand either Japanese or English. Therefore, we need to have staff people who understand Chinese. If it is hard to employ such a person as a full-time or part-time staff, it is useful to hire a professional interpreter whenever orientations are held. I have championed for a budget allocation for them occasionally but I have not yet succeeded.

At the orientations, much attention and focus is placed on the risks and crisis of fire, traffic accidents, illness, money troubles, earthquakes and so on. Japan is frequently subject to earthquakes. Regrettably, nobody can prevent them. I can just warn about these hazards. Like the one we recently experienced in the March earthquake, we were not prepared for the worst. It is important that ex post facto measures are in place to react speedily as well as providing warnings. However, this subject cannot be solved by a certain division or individual. It should be dealt with in a body by the institution responsible for the students. For risk and crisis management, working in cooperation with experts on the matter is absolutely essential. Thousand of non-professionals can only provide very limited help. It is also important not to confuse who is responsible if anything happens. Solid prevention measures and well thought out and researched safety measures are required but it is not so easy to put them in place according to Prof. Miyabayashi (2009) of the Chiba Institute of Science.

5. About Globalization

The “Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students” was proposed as a part of the strategy for “Globalization”. What is Globalization, anyway? This word has quite often been used in Japanese universities recently. A previous well-used word was “KOKUSAI-

KA (translated from Internationalization)". What definition should we give to these words that were translated into Japanese? They are hard to define because they are words with many meanings in English. How can they be translated from English so that they will be accepted? How would we translate "diversity"? Does "diversity" explain the present condition that over 60% of the international students are from China? Is 60% acceptable as a proper proportion for diversity? Some Japanese students have made cynical remarks that this diversity is not internationalization but "China-ization".

The increase in international students should be able to help universities become more open, according to the Outlines on the plan. In a certain sense this is true. On the other hand, there was a possibility that a swell in the population of foreigners would bring many more conflicts. There is also risk that the growth of foreigner population would create a contrary effect. It may cause social or political unrest. In Europe, many countries try to exclude foreigners, especially immigrants, from their countries. The anti-immigrant movement or policy is getting more support because of the surplus foreigner population. We should learn from these negative examples.

Having international students on campus does not globalize Japanese students. If accepting and integrating international students into our universities is to be an international exchange, it is necessary for both sets of students to interact each with other. Japanese students also need to learn the customs, habits and ways of thinking of international students. Most Japanese students have had relatively few chances to make the acquaintance of foreigners. Besides, there are not that many chances to associate closely on campus. I personally suspect that the plan can help make universities become internationalized or globalized.

Concerning the "diversity" question, opening gates more affirmatively for the Japanese people of all ages is effective. I rarely see elder students on campus. Studying with people of different generations and positions in a class should give Japanese students an exposure to diversity. They will be able to learn the way the rest of the world conducts their lives and this will promote their social skills. It will be an incentive for them to become more mature and enlightened.

6. Conclusion

After March 11, I think that the plan should be required to make a substantial change. We should reconsider why we need 300,000 international students. We have to review what nationalities and types of students are needed as well. In addition, we had better reflect on how we will insure the safety of international students.

Since the proposal of the "Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students" there has been an inclination to make light of matters for those already enrolled international students. It seems to me most universities postpone working effectively with already enrolled

international students to work instead on increasing the number of new students. Many universities are earnest about recruiting new international students. This interest is driven by the fact that there are fewer potential native applicants to draw on from a native student pool that is shrinking due to a steady decline in the birth rate. They are turning to foreigners to fill the vacancies. In their dire effort to increase student numbers the student selection process has deteriorated resulting in a lower overall quality of new students. I have heard the following remarks: “we need more international students because our doctoral course has not yet reached the full quota”. Personally, I am not comfortable with this statement. I do not understand why they do not take steps to reduce planned enrollment numbers.

Besides, an excessive dependence on international students from any one particular country has a risk. That was proven by the many language schools that got into difficulty because their Chinese students went back home in great numbers after the disaster in the Eastern Japan.

It goes without saying that we offer international students good quality higher education opportunities. In addition to language education, various other types of support is necessary and should be provided so that the students can lead comfortable and fruitful lives while staying in Japan. In this regard, risk and crisis management is important for them, above all, because of the dangers that sometimes accompany the experience of studying abroad. The problem is that there are only a minority of people who have misgivings about this. Once we accept international students into our society, we are responsible for their safety.

The recent earthquakes took a heavy toll of lives not only of Japanese but of foreigners as well. Twelve Japanese students from Toyama City were killed in February’s New Zealand quake. No one knows about the future. Now, I will make mention of a personal experience. I experienced the terror of an earthquake when I was a graduate student in San Francisco in 1989. There was a big earthquake in the Bay Area in October. Because of the earthquake, many schools were closed for weeks. We were not able to use the university library for months. I was terrified but I did not return to Japan. I wanted to continue studying in the U.S because Japanese universities offered no comparable course of study at that time. International students must be of a tough mind to conquer difficulties. Universities have to offer studies that appeal to foreigners so that they will want to continue their studies at all costs.

The nuclear crisis at the Fukushima No.1 power plant is still going on. We must take this situation seriously. Such being case, a goal of accepting 300,000 international students will not be reached. It is an outrageous number in view of the current situation of Japan. It is time to take a hard look at the “Plan to Accept 300,000 International Students”.

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