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Campus News

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Unfair MEXT Pressure on Humanities and Social Sciences Faculties!!

By Homi Hasegawa

"Stunningly short-sighted." "Outrageous proposals." "Anti-intellectual." "Shocking." "Utilitarian." "Narrow-minded attitude about higher education." These were the strong comments in the English media about the Japanese government's university policy. Did you know that the Japanese government has recently applied pressure to cut many Humanities and Social Sciences faculties in Japan? In June 2015, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) gave an official notice to universities suggesting that they abolish Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) organizations, or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society's needs. This tendency is based on Prime Minister Abe's economic growth strategy, which states that an important role of national universities is to build a system to produce human resources that match the needs of society by accurately grasping changes in industrial structure and employment needs. Many students also must have heard the news that Faculty of Arts Deans from 17 national universities, including Kochi University, issued a strong statement against MEXT's plans to make cuts to HSS faculties.

For this story, which I think is important to all students not just Humanities students, I interviewed some teachers and students in the Faculty of Humanities and Economics at Kochi University to see what they think about this issue. Professor Hiroshi Yoshio, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Economics, which will become the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences from April 2016, was one of the 17 Deans who issued the statement against MEXT. He commented for our story from the humanities perspective. "As rapid globalization influences regional communities in dramatic ways," he said, "now more than ever is the time when we should deeply consider how this affects the human condition. In this context, considering time-enduring universal truths will help our students carve out a way forward in thinking about society. The aim of the humanities is to consider principles that date back to the past and think about how to apply them to the present and to the future." Dean Yoshio emphasized the contributions from the humanities over the generations.

Professor Kazuyuki Iwasa, a specialist in economics, was asked about the role that Humanities education plays in society. He provided a detailed and thoughtful answer that helps to frame the issue in a way that everyone can understand.

"Without the Humanities perspective, there is the possibility that technology and science can advance too quickly without checks and balances," Prof. Iwasa said. Recently, people attach greater importance to technology. "However," he noted, "what we should think about is the meaning and value of the technology, and the reason why such technology came to exist by considering the background or trends in a society."

Also we have to think about what social issues arise in using technology. Prof Iwasa gave a couple of easy-to-understand examples. "Let's think about nuclear power generation," he began. "Nuclear power originally was made to produce an atomic bomb and this was later applied to make nuclear energy. From a technology perspective, some people regard nuclear power as good because it makes it possible to generate energy. However, thinking like this is dangerous and simplistic. In the long run, nuclear power generation has many problems such as how we deal with radioactive waste and what we should do if a nuclear power plant disaster occurs. Thinking about the social meaning of nuclear power and its various influences is indispensable for any society. This is the essential value that humanities brings to education, research, and society."

Prof. Iwasa also noted that we can say the same things about genetically modified products. "Genetically modified foods might be efficient [illegible] has a great influence on the natural environment. For example, there are influences on surrounding agricultural products, mutation of crops (not only the weeds die off), and influence on the health of consumers who will eat genetically modified food. Moreover, the relationship between farmers and GM seed makers has become extremely unequal because the power of seed makers is stronger than farming people. From only the agricultural technology perspective, people try to develop such things, but seen from the medium- and long-term perspective, without thinking of the broader impact and meaning of genetically modified products, it has become a big problem."

Humanities and Social Sciences faculties are a core part of university learning.
-Professor Kazuyuki Iwasa-

Today we live in an age when science is easy to run out of control. Technology experts are apt to focus on developing the technique, but they lack a perspective on its influences and the way of thinking from a human, social perspective. "Thus, the humanities perspective, which is the pursuit of knowledge from human, moral, and social economic perspectives, has never been more important. Based on this meaning, Humanities and Social Sciences faculties are a core part of university learning. Without this kind of learning in university, there is the danger that universities merely become training institutions," Prof. Iwasa pointed out.

For this story, I also asked Professor Miki Nakanishi, a social scientist, for her opinion. She commented about the proposed cuts from a couple of different perspectives. "From the social science perspective, when we broadly consider society, it is nonsense to abolish humanities because problem-solving abilities, or abilities related to creating a better society, decline without study of the social sciences. Social science is a discipline that takes the society as its subject of study for analysis. This is a discipline that analyzes, examines, and considers what is going on, identifies problems, and what we should do to solve them for society. Thus, it is extremely important not only for HSS faculties to continue to exist, but also to flourish," she noted.

MEXT is seeking a reduction in HSS, or a conversion of so called "useless" faculties that are not commercially viable. They are trying to distribute limited revenue sources effectively in a society with fewer children. But this sets a bad precedent. Prof. Nakanishi questioned the value to a company of hiring students who only have the skill of making money or knowing one specific skill. "We are living in a globalized world where multinational companies do serious environmental harm in the name of profit. To counter this, we are now asking companies to clearly state their position on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)". She continued by noting that, "Now is the time, more than ever, that we should require a sense of CSR from both companies and the prospective students they will hire. The Nippon Keidanren business association also promotes and values CSR. It is important to hire young people who are capable of dealing with this important concept. To educate students about CSR, they need more than one specific skill. That's what the social sciences can offer."

She concluded by offering something else that we should all think about. "Although the government is arguing only for the need for business skills, work life in a company is not everything," she emphasized. "When we consider our long life, it is more important for us to enrich the times when we are not working. It [illegible] the real world that we can truly understand the value of HSS."

I also asked Professor Darren Lingley about this issue. He teaches Intercultural Communication and English. He said that the MEXT proposal received lots of negative international media attention. Foreign academics all over the world were shocked, and the MEXT proposals were strongly criticized. "Humanities and Social Sciences are vulnerable all over the world, and they always have been. But MEXT's proposal was particularly draconian," he said. "I was pleased to see that the Science Council of Japan issued a statement of support noting that HSS and the natural sciences are both integral to education. MEXT has had to do some serious backtracking. Just for once, I'd like to see MEXT show some real vision about education instead of embarrassing itself again and again."

Yohei Morioka is a fourth-year student of Dept. of International Studies who has considered the issue from a liberal arts perspective. Mr. Morioka was firm in his opinion. He emphasized that practical study is not all there is. "MEXT has pressured national universities to abolish humanities and social sciences faculties, but I don't think this is good for either the students or society. I think humanities and social sciences faculties are essential to enhance the level of our education in liberal arts."

Learning both science and the humanities equally makes us well rounded and educated. We need both.
-Yohei Morioka-

These days, the lack of liberal arts cries out in society. Liberal arts means the ability of questioning a given pre-supposition, the ability of creating new rules, the ability of dealing with all changes and unanswerable questions, and understanding society and human beings. These abilities in the liberal arts are essential for us to live through a rapidly changing contemporary society. Mr. Morioka continued by noting that society needs balance with both science and humanities education. "What we can learn to improve these abilities can be found in the humanities and social sciences faculties. I think this is the main value of studying humanities. In addition to this, of course, science is really important but should be equal to the humanities. Only learning about humanities is not enough. Learning both science and the humanities equally makes us well rounded and educated. We need both."

Concerning this theme, many students feel the same. For example, as a Humanities student, I also felt irritated about this issue during my job hunting. I am a fourth-year student, and while attending job fairs, only the science students put an "I am a science student" label on the front of their suits to let personnel managers know the difference between science and humanities students at a glance. Even if I had an interest in a company, personnel managers asked me, "Is it okay for you although we are explaining only to science students?" I felt undervalued and unappreciated as a humanities student seeking a job. This was also the same when I interviewed for a company in the manufacturing industry. During the interview, interviewers asked me about my specialization by asking, "Which field are you specializing in?" and "How can it contribute to work and society?" When I was asked these questions, it was so hard to answer in a way that made the interviewers satisfied with me. That was my fault but I felt deep regret and irritation about why they associate my studies with work so simplistically. I thought that something that we can only study while [illegible]