

# Philosophy and Higher Education in Japan

MURAKAMI Yuko

Associate Professor, Tohoku University

***Abstract:** Universities do not stay the same; they accommodate the society along with value systems. Philosophy, which once considered to be an indispensable component of university as the cornerstone of liberal art, is under threat of expulsion as universities face to business-oriented reform and budget cut. This paper aims to propose tentative answers to the following questions: What roles should philosophy play in the current situation of higher education in Japan? How should the philosophy community in Japan contribute to the social roles of the academic field?*

## **The current situation of higher education**

Higher education (HE) is undergoing drastic change driven by technological development and global economy. Business and industry strongly demand internationalization and practical training of HE institutions. Humanities and social sciences, often accused of not meeting such demands, are put under strong pressure by cuts to their budgets. This paper will overview the current trends of HE in Japan and in the world, and then consider what roles philosophy community in Japan should play, both within itself, and in terms of its contribution to the social roles of the academic field in general.

As HE institutions in Japan are parts of our society, any discussion of their future must involve forecast for society in general in the global context. We first assume that all parties wish to improve our society through higher education. We all want everybody to be happy. We hope for a fully just society that satisfies the conditions of public responsibility and accountability. We assume that we share external restraints that condition the trajectories of contemporary Japanese society: for example, in the present decade, shrinking educational budgets, decrease of population and increase of the HE entrance rate, and global competition in the recruitment of excellent students and researchers-to-be; in the coming decades, global development with conflicts over limited resources such as water, more jobs

done by machines, and a glowing shift in population toward the elderly, due to increased longevity through advances in medical technology. It is worth mentioning that, despite the declining numbers of young people, one forecast claims that the HE entrance rate in the world will drastically increase<sup>1</sup> as more affordable due to open and online HE educational systems.

We also assume that most current HE institutions are established according to Wilhelm von Humboldt's idea of the university in terms of *Bildung*, characterized by the following three principles: unity of research and education, autonomy of academia with independent decision systems, and freedom of learning. The border between professional and vocational schools and traditional Humboldtian universities is now blurred. In fact, there exist successful programs of humanities and social sciences in HE institutions under a non-Humboldtian model. For instance, MIT has focused on applied sciences rather than liberal arts. However, it hosts an excellent department of philosophy, which has been combined with linguistics since its establishment. The department offers courses in traditional areas of philosophy such as metaphysics, ethics, and history of philosophy, while it encourages students to conduct interdisciplinary research in mathematics, computer science, and psychology. Such a mixture of pure and applied fields is observed not only in MIT but also in other philosophy departments in the United States, where the belief is prevalent that those with interdisciplinary backgrounds are in a stronger position to gain placement in a shrinking job market even after obtaining a Ph.D. degree. It nevertheless must be emphasized that their academic standards are kept high even in terms of preparedness for traditional academic training.

In fact, all parties concerning the HE issues propose their own future model of university under the name of Humboldtian ideals with different emphases. The more conservative groups reject any reform to the original ideals. The nineteenth-century ideas of general learning and cultural training are immutable and time-proof; they offer the basic framework for students in the twenty-first century to nurture attitudes and skills toward life-long learning. Reading classical literatures and in-class discussion continue to occupy the central position in HE education. The reformers claim: The old-fashioned idea has become obsolete. Students nowadays need up-to-date skills and knowledge to prepare for our drastically changing society, such as training in modern academic tools and devices (such as ICT, or information

---

<sup>1</sup> Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for Future We Want. From Statements to Action: Equity, Access, and Quality Learning Outcomes. (9-11 June 2015, UNESCO, Paris) <https://iite.unesco.org/files/news/639206/Paris%20Message%2013%2007%202015%20Final.pdf> (Last accessed: January 17, 2017)

and communication technology) and diverse work experience. The table below summarizes how each party respond to pressure toward change from industry and government.

	Conservative	Reform
Academic-oriented (Humboldtian)	Keep: General learning in liberal art + specialized departments	Accommodation for modernized academic tools
Business-oriented (Non-Humboldtian)	Professional/ vocational schools	Practical courses in universities, such as project-based learning in developing countries

Table 1: Contrast among attitudes to tertiary education

Another trend of the HE educational methodology is the shift from teaching to learning. Assuming specific knowledge becomes obsolete very fast, students need skills of life-long self-learning. The one-directional lecture style of knowledge transfer does not fit the assumption. Reading and discussion skills are more demanded than before. Alleged insufficiency in these skills among incoming students of HE institutions in Japan became the driver of reform in university entrance examinations and in the contents of the national curriculum. Short essays are preferred to multiple-choice; group interviews are strongly recommended in spite of personnel costs. The implementation of reform is still under watch, but HE admission with the new style of university entrance examinations may drastically change the learning styles of successful candidates.

Points of contrasts between conservative and reformative parties on HE are (1) topics and contents, (2) learning methods and devices, (3) teaching styles, and (4) course structure. They may propose some educational contents in common, although often with different emphases. For example, all troops recommend language education; conservative groups prefer Shakespeare<sup>2</sup>, for example, while application-oriented groups may rather appreciate intensive project-based-learning (PBL) in developing countries. Mathematics is strongly recommended for students in science and engineering majors as well as economics, sociology, and psychology,

---

<sup>2</sup> It might be inadequate stereotyping to mention Shakespeare as representative content of English courses in HE. In fact, Faculty members in charge of English classes in Japanese HE institutions belong to several communities: English literature, English-related linguistics, teaching English as second language (TESL), area studies, and other humanities and social sciences. Those from different communities often have totally different training histories so that their value systems vary. Those from TESL may prefer PBL.

which heavily rely on statistics and other areas of mathematics. Humanities and social sciences adopt scientific methods of investigations of their own traditional issues as well as technological supports. For example, philosophers of mind should collaborate with brain scientists; historians and archaeologists must refer to radiocarbon dating; and literature researchers should entertain big data and character recognition technology.

Few will deny that the environment of research and education has changed with ICT. Even philosophers, no matter which positions on education they have, read and publish articles and books online, routinely communicate via emails and short message services, and even publish their lectures and other academic outputs on YouTube. Some international academic conferences have begun to go online to accept video presentations. Goals of HE thus include equipping the next generation with knowledge and skills to survive in such an environment, although educational contents might be kept the same.

People are almost unanimous as regards the use of ICT for research, but differ on the educational uses of ICT in class. Students use smart phones to collect information in and out of classroom. Should lecturers allow them to read classical texts through smart phones in class if they are available free online? As it reduces learning costs, why not? Those who hesitate to introduce ICT in class may claim that smart phones might divert students' focus from class content; they just play around online while they sit in class. It is a question of teaching style: if in-class tasks are regularly assigned and checked on site, students have less chance to surf irrelevant online information. Large-sized classes, however, may not allow such on-site check-up processes. Such a teaching style requires smaller classes or online courses, both of which need more instructors and thus increase personnel costs. In other words, students pay less for information but more for learning environment in such cases.

The HE community is not unanimous on the evidence of the effectiveness of various educational methods and contents, even though educational practitioners and researchers have devoted considerable efforts to establish such evidence. It is almost impossible to conduct rigorous experiments with comparison groups in any educational process. Long-term observation is also difficult. Experiences in other countries may be irrelevant due to different social systems. Even in a single social system, evaluation of skills and knowledge in the changing context is almost impossible; still, the next generation must be ready to learn throughout their life to prepare for continuous changes. What will be long-lasting knowledge and skills? What goals should their graduation be tied to, to equip them with skills to survive in

a technologically shifting society? Which methods are best? Are they feasible in the current schools or HE institutions? The main issue is thus about competing value systems. Young generations should be equipped with ambivalent skills to surf on waves of multiple value systems to instantly judge according to the very adequate one at each moment, and to keep personality for responsibility and accountability.

Now we progress our argument according to the following reading of the Humboldtian idea: an environmental model of university educational services. Educational service should enhance personal growth with external stimuli which continuously adjust a student's directions of growth. Stimuli do not consist just of what are in the curriculum, but include interactions among students and the university community. Admission policy is thus important as it shows its own design of the student body. Some universities emphasize uniformity of the student body, while others put significance on diversity. Educational infrastructure is also essential: such as libraries, ICT services, as well as lifelines such as water supply, food, and electricity. Some universities offer the opportunity to live in a dormitory.

Such services should be comprehensive. A partial adoption may not work functionally without customized coordination for each student. For example, courses, online or offline, are essential components of higher education, but they need to be combined into a service system with quizzes, feedback in terms of paper comments and grades, and discussion sessions with other participants.

But Humboldtian HE also has a downside. First, its enormous and ever-increasing costs. ICT drastically raises infrastructure costs of HE institutions. University libraries struggle with the financial burden of keeping journal contracts. Active learning programs require extra personnel costs for on-site facilitators. These cost pressures leads to the trends in higher education throughout the world: decrease of tenured faculty members and reliance on part-time lecturers and online graders; closure of departments of humanities and social sciences, which are accused of being unable to meet public demands. It seems impossible to keep the traditional style of higher education.

Some universities have already begun restructuring liberal arts, claiming that such a change meets students' needs by enhancing employability. Project-based learning (PBL) study-abroad programs for a couple of weeks are substituted for courses of reading classics of English literature, to ask students to experience real workplace. Students majoring in science and engineering are encouraged to take so-called "liberal art courses" to obtain a wider perspective, which turns out to mean

listening to guest lectures by business and industry figures! Universities increase the numbers of courses taught in English to promote themselves as providers of international education.

Such a restructuring of liberal arts programs to business-oriented training in HE institutions is led by the Japanese government, which pursues the agenda of transforming the education system through preferential distribution of budgets towards compliant institutions. Moreover, the Tobitate program of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) urges students to go abroad with the financial support of the business and industry communities. Students with an orientation toward global business are likely to be awarded while purely academic-oriented students are often discouraged under a highly competitive environment.

The second downside of the Humboldtian HE is an increase in the HE entrance rate, or the popularization of HE in periods of high economic growth in each country. This has transformed students' expectations, as well as what is expected of them. The majority of current students do not hope to be connected to the academic world after graduation from their undergraduate program. Many do not even have in mind the idea that they are going into academia when they enter a university. For them, it is just a continuation of high school, where they are allowed to simply focus on what they are given. In other words, they are not well prepared for HE, but once they are accepted, it is the responsibility of HE institutions to lead them to live under the ideas of HE. Basic academic skill courses are designed to meet their demands.

HE institutions in Japan have already suffered from the popularization issue. In fact, it is more severe here than in other countries, for at least the following two reasons. First, HE admission in Japan differs from countries in North America and Europe, in that it does not guarantee preparedness for college through achievement tests or certification equivalent to SAT, baccalaureate, or Abitur programs. Skills and knowledge of freshmen vary by HE institutions in Japan, but research suggests the domestic average is below the global average. Second, retrieving up-to-date knowledge in the global community requires more language skills for Japanese students than students of other developed countries, while incoming students to HE on average do not equip themselves with the required skills enough.

For example, let us examine the average English language skills of new incoming students of humanities and social sciences at Nihon University<sup>3</sup>. The reported average scores of the English standardized examination (ELPA) are equivalent to the TOEIC 390-400 range, the expected scores of first- or second-year high school students<sup>4</sup>. Considering that TOEIC 740-820 range, or equivalent to IELTS score 6 or TOEFL iBT 60-78, is considered to be the minimal language requirement to fully understand college-level courses in English-speaking countries, most students in Japanese HE institutions are not well prepared to attend courses taught in English. In fact, the very same fact is used to justify the global-business-oriented transformation of HE and the introduction of English-taught courses as language training. Of course, poorly prepared students learn less from courses taught in English, as their language skills often do not meet the minimal standard to fully understand such courses at a college-level.

Those who object to English-taught courses in Japanese HE rely on a widespread belief that abundant translations of academic literatures in European languages to Japanese have allowed HE institutions in Japan to teach almost every subject in Japanese. This belief does not stand any more, however. Publishers often refuse to issue expensive academic books, as the budgets of university libraries shrink and the cost of e-journals booms. Moreover, students get less financial support from their families, while “governmental scholarship” is in fact a student loan. Some students cannot afford expensive textbooks<sup>5</sup> or their own personal computer<sup>6</sup>. They prefer reasonably priced textbooks or even free material to reduce their costs for learning environment. In such a situation, up-to-date academic contents may not be fully covered by Japanese books, and college preparedness of students will be more critical in Japanese HE than now. Reading skills in foreign

---

<sup>3</sup> Kumada et als. (2015) English Proficiency Improvements in 1st Year University Students during 2014 : An Analysis Using a Placement Test. Nihon Daigaku Bunri-gakubu Kenkyu Kiyou (Bulletin of School of Liberal Arts, Nihon University) (90), 131-142, 2015.

<http://www.chs.nihon-u.ac.jp/institute/human/kiyou/90/8.pdf> (Last accessed on January 13, 2017) It is the university with the largest student population in Japan and completion for admission surpasses the average, as the deviation value of successful candidates suggests.

<sup>4</sup> MEXT (2016) Heisei 26 nendo Eigo-ryoku Chousa Kekka (koukou san-nensei) no Sokuho (平成 27 年度英語力調査結果 (高校 3 年生) の速報) March 26, 2016.

[http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/117/shiryo/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/05/24/1368985\\_7\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/117/shiryo/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/05/24/1368985_7_1.pdf) (Last accessed: January 6, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> It is not common for university bookstores in Japan to buy back and sell used textbooks.

<sup>6</sup> Most students use smart phones to write assignments or watch assigned videos.

languages<sup>7</sup> will be more essential for every academic field. Academic publishers should keep up trends of the world as early after their admission as possible.

As civilian budgets shrink, the military research budget is now on focus. It brings up debate of so-called dual-use issues. Outcomes of academic research can be applied to military purposes, even though its original goal has nothing to do with such goals. It is not just in science, technology, engineering, and medical (STEM) fields but also in humanities and social sciences. The languages and cultures of specific areas are essential geopolitical knowledge. Some universities, including the University of Tokyo, have instructed their members not to apply for military research programs, however. Some academic societies publish guidelines for dual-use research. The Philosophical Association of Japan may well consider its social position on such issues and should publish a guideline as philosophers may play indispensable roles in dual-use programs as ethical evaluation of purposes and methods of research is critical in selecting dual-use applications. The dual-use issues may distort liberal arts itself as humanities and social science can be “Intellectual safe place” where every member can speak up without feeling threatened. Philosophy may play an essential role to guarantee the point in education.

The environmental model of HE may be changed, however, with cost reduction via massive open online courses (MOOCs). Tuitions and fees of MOOCs or other open universities are far smaller than real universities so that such distant education systems attract students in countries suffering severe economic problems. For example, The National Distance Education University (UNED) in Spain has 205,000 students,<sup>8</sup> with most students entering just after high school graduation. The Open University Japan has about 90,000 students<sup>9</sup>. Such distant education systems will be associated with flexible learning: no (or little) need of classrooms or other facilities in a single campus. Students learn by themselves and need to commit themselves to keep up with the curriculum to obtain a degree. In the case of MOOCs, the learning environment will go online as a whole. It will annihilate the current discussion whether students may use smart phones in class; they choose their own device to accommodate their situation. Learning becomes ubiquitous.

---

<sup>7</sup> English language courses in secondary education institutions in Japan have shifted foci from grammar and reading to listening and speaking. The current national curriculum of English for secondary education covers less knowledge of English grammar than the curriculum under which current HE faculty members experienced.

<sup>8</sup>[http://portal.uned.es/portal/page?\\_pageid=93,24305391&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://portal.uned.es/portal/page?_pageid=93,24305391&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ouj.ac.jp/hp/gaiyo/who.html>



MOOCs polarize instructors, however. A small number of “star” instructors broadcast courses, while most become part-time invisible supports with a relatively small income. Teaching-only contracts will be prevalent. HE institutions will also be polarized; those which train researchers-to-be and the others which concentrate on education. The shift in the job market to part-time teaching jobs may discourage young scholars.

In short, “collapse of decency” represents the current situation in HE. It was widely believed that college graduates would get decent jobs; HE instructors are respectable; and it is appropriate to enjoy cultural activities such as reading classics and history, examine arts and music on the basis of a wide knowledge of cultural backgrounds. HE does not play any such social role any more, however. HE should be available to everybody, no matter of social status.

### **University and Philosophy in Japan**

Now we turn to the following three interrelating questions. What philosophy should be offered in the current context of HE with shrinking budgets and intense demands from society? What roles should philosophy play in the current situation of HE in Japan? How should the philosophy community in Japan contribute to the social roles of the academic field?

If unity of research and teaching is respected and teaching needs to be shaped for the future, research should also be changed. Moreover, if philosophy departments cannot afford to hire enough teaching staff to cover all the traditional fields, the departmental structure should adapt to meet students’ educational needs.

There seem to be two directions philosophy departments can take to cope with the situation. The first is that a wider coverage of specializations within philosophy may be realized by the institutionalization of audit student status and credit transfers among universities. This would be possible in areas where many HE institutes reside such as the greater Tokyo area and Kwansai; faculty members play the coordinator role to advise students to audit adequate courses from multiple universities according to their interests and skills. In this case, each faculty member may keep their own research coverage as is, to proceed into deep consideration and analysis on the sacrifice of their coordinator workload. This option is not possible, however, in most areas in Japan, where HE institutions are dispersed. Even in metropolitan areas, where the first option seems to be realizable, HE institutions

may not keep doing so for long. The coordinator job is not possible without knowledge of the research community itself. It requires too many tedious trivialities to meet students' demands. There is no systematic and sustainable personnel system to assign adequate person to such jobs.

The other, which is not ideal but affordable, is to modify the coverage areas of each faculty member to fit students' demands and needs. Of course, this has a limit; nobody can do everything. Worse, students' demands may not be adequate for themselves. They may want quick skills and tips to survive, but these easy ways will not support them in the long term.

That is the very point that philosophers should focus on. Humanities and social science, if rightly instructed, offer foundational knowledge and basic skills of argument evaluation, which are essential for long-term learning. The contents, while incredibly interesting by themselves in researchers' eyes, do not matter for students for short-term purposes; those "boring and useless" contents are however a key to learn the learning methods. We can learn and experience the external world through the combination of contents and conceptual framework. That is what to loudly claim out of research communities in humanities and social science. Philosophy is the cornerstone of the function of learning methods of learning themselves.

Thus there is a third direction: contents may stay the same but should be presented with new emphases. Metaphysics and epistemology are now hot real-world issues in connections with artificial intelligence. Ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and philosophy of law find new cases to design new ethical guidelines and to meet social demands. The history of philosophy offers reference points even in topic-based discussion sessions on practical topics such as social inequalities or natural resource issues, but emphasize the texts are contemporary of themselves. All philosophers in history have worked to understand the world on the basis of the knowledge extant at the time, which turns out to involve implicit assumptions of philosophical theories. These must be clarified before applying philosophical theories to the issues of our contemporary topics. Applications of philosophy without such consideration of social demands can be totally inadequate.

Evaluation of arguments is one of the main goals of traditional logic education. The significance of such a skill increases in the internet age, as the amount of information published online, both in text and video formats, explodes. Coverage of traditional logic is not enough, however. The notion of validity and other concepts of deductive logic are still useful, but survival in the information society demands more skills. Educational contents of informal logic should be

extended to include knowledge of real-time communication and characterizations of media as well as scientific uses of induction and abduction. Texts from historically accumulated literatures of philosophy are treasures of training samples, which our current common sense often does not work to understand, but we need to tackle them with logical reading skills and logical skills of evaluation of arguments on the basis of a knowledge of historical backgrounds. Logical skills of evaluating arguments are essential in applied philosophy. Detection of implicit assumptions, which requires deep understanding of background information behind arguments, is one of the most desired skills in the age of information.

Those basic skills of philosophy also serve as an introduction to research skills, which researchers devote themselves to cultivating for life. Equipment of learning skills is a core of the Humboldtian idea of the unity of research and education; it should not be misread as identifying HE institutions with researcher training centers, however. Although a significant role of HE institutions is to nurture future faculty members and researchers, we cannot stand the current regressive production of researchers any more. Philosophers of the next generation should gain the skills and knowledge to explore uncharted territories with foundational knowledge of existing philosophical theories and philosophical methods. Future philosophers will be able to compete against non-philosophers if they arm themselves with interdisciplinary skills and knowledge. The current philosophers should support their training via reading classical texts and writing and speaking logically. Academic associations of philosophy and related areas must underwrite such training of future philosophers. The Philosophical Association of Japan must lead the movements toward original research.

Accommodation of modernized research tools is necessary to design the curriculum of philosophy education as well as scholarship of learning and teaching. Languages, reflective skills and attitudes, rhetoric, and logic (both deductive and inductive), are the core components of a skill framework, while the history of philosophy and current research attempts offer contents. Both complement each other; none is dispensable. In addition, fields of training must include both young philosophers with non-philosophers. They should not withdraw in a narrow specialization if they want to survive under social demands. They need to know how to talk with researchers of other fields and professionals out of academia as well as citizens.

Another urgent issue in Japan is to build intellectual safe places. Philosophers can be role models in our society to establish an environment without discrimination, sexual harassment, and political pressures. Imbalance of educational opportunities due to financial situations should be mitigated.

Philosophy for children, for example, must be focused on social consequences. The Education Endowment Foundation (2016)<sup>10</sup> reports that learning philosophy improves mathematical and linguistic skills in children as well as their meta-cognition. The movie *Just a Beginning*, a documentary of philosophy for children in Paris, should be read in the context of social disparity as a long-term social experiment in a financially and socially challenged area, where residents include more immigrants than other areas, examining whether it may adjust social polarization. Another consequence of the EEF research is that philosophy in elementary and secondary education might enforce differences in academic achievements among social classes if it is given mainly to children from relatively rich families.

Philosophers need to watch connections to secondary education in addition to HE. Universities may assign evaluation questions of argument evaluation as a part of philosophy as writing topics of entrance examination. Such contents are to be covered in “Logical Japanese (Ronri Kokugo)” in the next national curriculum as well as in “Citizenship education (Kokyo).” Philosophers should encourage educators to learn philosophy to instil argument evaluation skills into society.

The Philosophical Association of Japan should promote diversity not only for its members but also for society to ask its members to behave well to construct intellectual safe place around them.

Philosophy is alive. It always focuses on contemporary issues on the shoulder of the giant of historical accumulation of trial-and-errors of philosophical considerations. Hide Ishiguro in personal discussion once pointed out the educational design of philosophy in Oxford University. The department of philosophy in Oxford offers an M. Phil. Degree. The degree is respected more than Doctor of Philosophy in Oxford as well as other doctoral degrees. The M.Phil. represents Ryle’s ideal of philosophy in higher education. He emphasizes original

---

<sup>10</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2016) *Philosophy for Children*, Project report. [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Support/Campaigns/Evaluation\\_Reports/EEF\\_Project\\_Report\\_PhilosophyForChildren.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Support/Campaigns/Evaluation_Reports/EEF_Project_Report_PhilosophyForChildren.pdf) (Last accessed: January 5, 2017. Cf. Project URL <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/our-work/projects/philosophy-for-children>)

research, which is considered to surpass philological studies which leads to the doctoral degree. The author believes Ryle's ideals of the M. Phil. program reflect his foresight on the roles of philosophy in universities in order to produce philosophers of younger generations courageous enough to keep up with the rapid changes of our society.

Readers might ask: what resources do we need, both financial and in terms of personnel, to adapt the change? My answer: nothing other than what we have now in hand or less. Current universities are just like Neurath's boat on the rapidly changing world with no secure foundations nor any immune system against social criticism. We, like sailors, must modify ourselves to survive in the world of post-truth.

### **Acknowledgement**

Professor Hide Ishiguro told me Ryle's original ideas toward establishment of M.Phil. in the department of philosophy, Oxford University, according to her own experiences. The project is partially supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant 16H03338.