

University of Tokyo failing non-Japanese students

The Japan Times, April 11, 2015

Nearly 70 percent of foreign students accepted by the University of Tokyo for undergraduate coursework taught in English decided to go elsewhere for the 2014 school year, data from the university revealed. All of these students chose instead to enter universities outside of Japan. The mass-shunning exposes Japan's educational system as still rather isolated and represents a setback for efforts to establish broader international education here.

The University of Tokyo started its Programs in English in 2012, and they seem well-designed. The exclusive programs were limited to a maximum of 15 students majoring in either Japan studies or environmental studies. But since their inception, the programs have expanded enrollment quotas to 61 students. However, each year fewer and fewer foreign students have enrolled, with the number falling to just 20 in 2014. And although, as the university noted, the quality of foreign students has not diminished, a refusal rate of 70 percent shows more changes are needed.

This problem is shared by many universities trying to become more international. Some foreign students do not want to study in Japan because the number of classes offered in English is still so limited. Japan's reputation for low levels of English study means motivated foreign students are hesitant to spend four years here. The difference in English ability between foreign students and Japanese students is often a problem, as well. If the level of material has to be reduced for the sake of Japanese students, foreign students

with a generally higher level of English simply will not come here.

In many universities, an increasing number of faculty members are willing and able to conduct classes in English. A growing, if still small, number of Japanese students genuinely do want to study in English. Unfortunately, universities have failed to sufficiently restructure their classes and curricula to permit this. Japanese students who want to study in English, or at least would do so if required, are waiting for the schools to improve their approach. The program at the University of Tokyo is a start, but clearly more work is needed.

Another problem is the rigidity of the overall curriculum inside Japanese universities. Being restricted to taking courses inside one single program or department is still the norm. Yet around the world, students are encouraged to take courses in many different subject areas and in various departments, in order to think more diversely and expansively. Insufficient choice inside over-specialized areas is surely another reason students are not going to the University of Tokyo, or to other universities in Japan.

If foreign students will not come here and Japanese students will not go abroad, Japan's current isolationism in education will only continue. Universities have not risen up to the English and curricular standards that other countries have already achieved. Universities need to redouble their efforts if internationalized, English-language education is ever to become a reality in Japan.