

FOCAL POINT ON JAPAN'S DESIGNATED NATIONAL UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE

PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH KYOTO UNIVERSITY, TOHOKU UNIVERSITY & THE UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO

DESIGNATED FOR PROGRESS

Japan's **RADICAL NEW PROGRAM** to boost just a handful of universities has precedent across the world

The first three Designated National Universities were selected by the Japanese government in June 2017. The program, from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), will funnel additional government funds to universities which radically redirect their endeavour toward more autonomous, international and industry-concentrated futures. Kyoto University, Tohoku University and the University of Tokyo will each receive roughly 300 million yen (USD 2.8 million).

It's the latest response to a highly publicized, long decline in Japanese university rankings. In 2004, the government tried to push its prestigious publicly funded universities to become more like corporations. However, Professor Futao Huang, from the Research Institute for Higher Education at Hiroshima University, says the move was in some ways a failure. In a 2017 survey the institute conducted of up to 63,000 Japanese faculty, the responses suggested that national universities' governance had become significantly more centralized and ineffective compared with a similar 1992 survey.

Huang adds that there has been little growth since the 1980s in the proportion of international scholars who have become university leaders in Japan, despite the share of foreign faculty quadrupling since then.

The new program, launched in 2016, asked top institutions to apply for Designated National University status. It's a self-directed initiative, asking universities to propose ways to provide stronger research, administrative and financial reform and international engagement. Universities vying

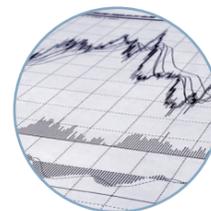


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While roughly 75% of Japan's universities are private, in 2017 **EIGHT OF JAPAN'S TOP 10 RANKED UNIVERSITIES** were publicly funded national universities.



The Designated National Universities (DNUs) are part of the second phase of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's economic reforms, which aim to **TRIPLE CORPORATE INVESTMENT IN UNIVERSITIES AND R&D AGENCIES** by 2025.



Only Japan's **TOP SEVEN** universities in research, social contribution and internationalization were eligible to apply for DNU status. The four that were not chosen are awaiting the results of revised proposals.



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for entry must also provide regular progress reports. The rewards for acceptance include deregulation, increased funding and increased autonomy over the commercial use of their facilities and land.

Flagship universities are not a new concept — high-profile examples include the Ivy League in the United States, the Golden Triangle in the United Kingdom and, since the 1990s, the rising stars of China's C9 League. By acquiring limited financial resources, these institutions are able to model best practices and act as a beacon for other higher education institutions in their region.

Professor Jo Ritzen from the United Nations University in the Netherlands was one of the longest-serving Ministers of Education in the European Union through the 1990s. He says Japan is now experiencing a similar watershed to European higher education in the 1990s. "European universities went through a severe crisis in that period."

Reforms aimed at increasing top-level university funding and autonomy across the Netherlands, Denmark and other Nordic countries saw their university ecosystems grow in global standing, but they were not without controversy and hardship. "It's difficult in politics, because the instinct is to support struggling universities. However, this doesn't produce the best outcome for the students," says Ritzen. "It's better to concentrate resources at the top."

The DNU initiative is not a grant program however, explains Hiroshi Yoshimoto, director-general of Japan's Higher Education Bureau, citing Japan's restricted national budgets. The universities will need, he stresses, to seek out their own funding to reach their stated objectives. "[Designated] National Universities must strengthen their organizational management, through improving their cost consciousness and strategies for resource allocation," he says.

To do this, privileges have been granted to DNUs to allow them to expand investment businesses and modify salary standards to attract top researchers. And Yoshimoto says that MEXT is planning to further deregulate

exclusively for DNUs. The aims of the funding structure are not dissimilar to those in China, where none of the major C9 group of universities receives more than 60% of its funding from public sources, and the US, where institutions commonly have huge income streams from assets such as hospitals and property. In fact, somewhat controversially, one aspect which is not deregulated for the DNUs has been tuition fees, which also makes up only a small portion of the income for the C9.

Industry funding will logically have to make up an increasing portion of Japanese national university income. The country's multinational engineering, electronics and manufacturing corporations are household names, including the likes of Panasonic, Hitachi, Sony and Toyota. But they are reticent participants in local university collaborations, citing onerous administration and long project delivery times. According to the OECD, Japanese businesses contributed an average 2.7% to higher education R&D expenditure over the past decade, much less than the 5.1% in the US and 34.5% in China. That's not to say the Japanese corporate sector does not spend big money on research and development. According to the Nature Index, Japanese corporations were the world's second-largest contributors after the United States to corporate authorship between 2012 and 2017.

To attract more essential industry funding, DNUs will need to implement bold changes, the nature of which will likely shake the foundations of the designated few to the core. It may only be a very select group that are willing to undertake such singular reforms. Huang points out that there are a handful of other internationally recognised national universities that should perhaps logically have become DNUs, but that they "seem to not be as active in terms of implementing the Ministry of Education's goals of internationalization". As flagships, it seems that the new DNUs are perhaps best placed to lead the way into a new world and to take Japanese research along for the ride. ■



Jo Ritzen is from **UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY** in the Netherlands.

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