

Japanese universities move towards new era

Description

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[imageright]<https://www.qs.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/japan-flag-e1328553574514.jpg>[/imageright]

Japan is a safe, developed country whose culture has global appeal, an international centre for design and style. Just the place that students might flock to from around the world.

Except that they don't. As [Japan's university profile](#) shows, Japanese universities do well on four of the six criteria we use to compile the World University Rankings, but fare miserably on the other two, attractiveness to international students and faculty.

There are deep-seated reasons for Japan's inability to attract foreign academics, and indeed foreign labour in general. But universities are now doing something about their low appeal to overseas students. For while there are many reasons for Japan's lack of allure foreign students, one of the big ones is within the universities' own control.

It is simply that they start their academic year in April. That means that foreign students wanting to go to a Japanese university face a gap of almost a year before they can get started. And when they leave, they are again out of sync with other nations. While some Japanese universities already offer a limited autumn intake, moves for more radical change are gaining pace.

Now Tokyo University, 25 in the World University Rankings and standard-bearer for the nation's higher education sector, has taken charge by proposing a move to autumn admissions.

This switch would not be simple. The existing system ties in with school schedules, and means that graduates emerge at a time that suits a long-established recruitment machine.

But the Japanese media report that the prime minister and the education minister both support change. The ministry did a survey which suggests that only three nations start their academic year in April, while about 160 prefer the autumn. This anomaly reduces Japanese universities' ability to recruit round the world. Perhaps more importantly for government, it is a problem for official targets to get Japanese students to spend time abroad.

Todai, the University of Tokyo, has now made a decisive declaration in favour of change. It says that as well as helping international recruitment, autumn admission would allow Japanese students to take a "high-impact" course on university learning, easing their transition from school to higher education. This would lead into a two-semester year followed by a western-style break from June to August. However, Todai adds that employers and wider society will need to buy into the idea. In addition, while Todai is the unquestioned thought leader among Japanese universities, it cannot proceed without support from the rest of the sector.

Here there is good news in the shape of a survey by Mainichi, the leading Japanese newspaper. It suggests that over 40 per cent of national universities and many private ones will consider the switch. Among the major players, only Kyoto (32 in the WUR and second only to Tokyo for prestige) seemed reluctant, along with some specialist teacher training institutions whose year is tied to the school timetable. Keio and Waseda, the big private players in Tokyo, are both positive.

Of course these reforms will not alter two other big problems about studying in Japan: its cost of living and its unique language. More teaching in Japanese universities is already happening in English, and it seems that the government will put more money behind efforts to internationalise Japan's student population.

Todai statement <http://tinyurl.com/757fyng>