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**THE FUTURE OF  
JAPANESE HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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March 1989

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## 1. The Growth of a "Seller's Market"

Japanese higher education as a whole has enjoyed continuous growth in both enrollment and the number of institutions since the new university system (Shinsei-Daigaku Seido) was introduced under the influence of the American Occupation in 1949. During the Occupation period radical educational reform was carried out, and the single-track (6-3-3-4) school ladder based on the American model was introduced. The old, prewar multi-track system of higher education characterized by a hierarchy of status, was integrated into two basic institutions called Daigaku (universities) and Tanki-daigaku (junior colleges). As a result of this reorganization, by the beginning of the 1950s, 201 new universities and 149 new junior colleges were created in place of the 49 existing universities (9 imperial universities and 40 national, public and private universities) and 391 various types of higher educational institutions composed of Koto-gakko (higher schools), Semmon-gakko (specialized technical schools) and Shihan-gakko (normal schools) which had existed before the end of the World War II. (1)

In 1950, there were about 250,000 students enrolled in the existing 350 institutions mentioned earlier. By 1960 the number increased to more than 1 million students in 525 institutions (245 universities and 280 junior colleges), by 1971 to 1.6 million students in 851 institutions (382 universities and 479 junior colleges), and by 1980 to 2.2 million students in 963

institutions (446 universities and 517 junior colleges). (See Chart I). The admission rate to junior colleges and universities among 18 year olds was less than 10 percent in 1950, but rapidly climbed to 23.6 percent ( male 29.2%, female 17.7%) by 1970, and to 37.4 percent (male 41.3%, female 33.3%) by 1980 (See Chart II).

In addition to the traditional higher education sector, in 1980, there were 46,000 students enrolled in 62 technical colleges (Koto-semmongakko) as well as more than 150,000 students in technical and vocational schools (Semmongakko) at the post-secondary education level. If we add those students studying at technical-vocational types of postsecondary institutions to those attending universities and junior colleges, almost half of the nation's young people are receiving some sort of education beyond the secondary level.

In 1987, there are 1.9 million students in 474 universities (95 national, 37 public, and 342 private) and 437,000 students in 561 junior colleges (38 national, 53 public, and 470 private), admission rate to junior college and universities is 36 percent. There are also 50,000 students in 62 technical colleges (54 national, 4 public, and 4 private). In addition to the traditional higher education sector, there are 483,000 students studying in 2581 technical and vocational schools (159 national, 166 public, and 2,256 private) at the level of post-secondary education.

This dramatic expansion of higher education was accompanied by the unprecedented growth of secondary education. The rate of admission to senior high schools (grade 10-12) for those who completed compulsory schooling (grade 1-9) was 42.5 percent, when the new high school system started in 1948. It increased to 60 percent in 1961, jumped to 80 percent in 1971, and only five years later exceeded 90 percent. In 1980, the admission rate to senior high schools had climbed to 94.3 percent, lifting the educational level of the relevant age cohort well beyond the level of "semi-compulsory schooling". (2)

In terms of quantity, this demonstrates that Japanese higher education has, since the late 1940's, been a "high-growth industry". There has been a continuous increase in the "push" pressures for more educational opportunities from parents and students, stimulated by "pull" pressures from employers needing a greater number of college graduates. The continuing growth of Japanese higher education depends on the existence of a large pool of students seeking higher education.

Since 1951, Japanese higher education can be described as a "seller's market" in the sense that colleges (i.e. sellers of higher educational services) have always been flooded with applicants for admission (purchasers of higher education). Japanese colleges and universities were highly valued because of

their screening function in which they selected young potential people, based on their academic abilities, and distributed them into various specialized fields according to the needs of the labor market.

For many large Japanese industries this was a blessing since they were handicapped by a lack of college graduates during high economic growth periods. As a result, they urged universities to assume the important function of "sorting" potential good students to meet their manpower needs according to the hierarchial rank of universities rather than to take on the role of trainers of students in terms of practical training. Industrial leaders believe that college graduates are much more effectively trained and socialized into good employees through strong in-service training programs conducted by the industry itself. Because of the life-long employment system and an emphasis on seniority, most employees are expected to work for the same company until they retire, although this practice has gradually been changing during the past decade as will be mentioned later. For these reasons, both business and government have devoted substantial money and energy to their own in-service-training programs in order to make their employees' skills directly relevant to their organizational needs. From this viewpoint, the most important factor for employers is to recruit good potential young people who will be educable or trainable by the company to meet its direct needs rather than the "added-value", or in another words, the value of any specialized

academic or professional training obtained at the university.

As a result, it is believed that universities in Japan have a monopoly on human resources. The highest quality young people are those who are carefully selected through their university entrance examination, a screening device choosing those with the greatest potential to meet the needs of Japanese industry. There has, in fact, been no other human resource pool available to employers other than that of colleges and universities. Although conservative curricula and non-practical teaching in colleges and universities has often been criticized by the business world, the lack of relevant training in higher education has been compensated for by the strong in-service training characterizing many large companies.

## 2. Demographic Change

Then, for the future of the 21st century, will colleges and universities in Japan continue to enjoy prosperity as they have during the high-growth period? Will they continue to be flooded with student applicants, and will their graduates continue to meet the needs of Japanese industry without changing their basic programs, curriculum and teaching? Will the thousand colleges and universities in Japan be able to survive during the 1990's when a sharp decline in the college-age population is predicted?

One of the important changes in the next decade will be a demographic change. This is one of very few trends that is clearly predictable. The 18 year old population is expected to decrease by nearly one half million during the period from 1992 to 2000. Since the decline of the college-age population means the loss of the major customer of Japanese higher education (in Japan, 90 percent of college enrollments are drawn from the 18-22 year old population), it will certainly influence the financial condition of many tuition-dependent private institutions. One of the most significant aspects of Japanese higher education is the great share controlled by the private sector. In 1987, more than 70 percent of institutions and students in the nation were in the private sector, and most of the private institutions have very small endowments. Therefore their financing is heavily dependent upon revenues from tuition and fees paid by students and parents. Thus, this demographic trend is, perhaps, the single most



critical factor affecting the future of colleges and universities in Japan.

While Japanese higher education as a whole has enjoyed continuous growth since the mid-1970s, and, during 1980-87, enrollment grew from 2.2 million to 2.3 million and the number of institutions increased from 961 to 1,035, on the other hand, by 1987 the admission rate to higher education had dropped slightly from 37.4 percent of 1970 to 36.1 percent of 1987 (male 37.1%, female 35.1%). The admission rate has never surpassed the 38.6 percent rate of 1976 when it was at its highest.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the age cohort for elementary school fell to its lowest level since the World War II "baby booms" (The first baby boom was 1947-49, the second, 1971-74). As a result, many kindergartens around Japan have canceled some of their classes, and this so called "child shock" has begun to affect the primary schools and, inevitably, will impact on secondary and higher education in the 1990s. According to the government's population statistics, the number of 18 year olds decreased from 2.5 million in 1966 to 1.6 million in 1985. Since 1986, the number has increased dramatically and it is estimated to increase even further, from 1.85 million in 1986 to 2.05 million in 1992. However, from 1993, the number will again drop sharply from 1.9 million in 1993 to 1.5 million in 2000, a decrease of nearly a half million from the 1992 level (See Chart III). Therefore, the survival of institutions in a period with a

sharply declining college-age population is, perhaps, one of the single-most serious problems facing those concerned with higher education policy and institutional management.

In the face of these demographic changes, in 1984, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture published Higher Education Planning for the Period of Post-1986. The Ministry's plan estimated that an additional 86,000 enrollment places would be necessary during 1986-1992 to provide for the expected increase of 18 years olds. But, because of the anticipated sharp decrease of 18 years olds between 1992 and 2000, 44,000 student places out of the 86,000 will have to be eliminated by the year 2000.

As soon as the Ministry's plan was published, and despite the prediction of a declining college-age population in the 1990's, there was a great "rush" to establish new institutions, new departments, and/or new programs during the 1987-88. During the 1987 academic year, 9 new universities (1 public, 8 private) and 15 junior colleges (1 national, 1 public, and 13 private) were established, and during the 1988 academic year, 17 (1 national, 1 public, 15 private) new universities and 11 new junior colleges (1 national, 2 public and 8 private) were created(3). In addition, a number of new departments and programs were added or expanded as a result of the predictions, and student places were greatly increased. The "rush" to establish these new institutions by university administrators was motivated

by their belief that this was a final chance to expand higher education's capacity before the period of declining enrollment which will make expansion impossible. They seem to believe that the best strategy for their survival is to expand their institutional size, adding new departments and programs to attract prospective students.

As the 1990's approach, it is predicted that Japanese higher education will face a period of "institutional self-selection" in which a number of higher educational institutions could be closed or severely cut back. This scenario is being predicted by some pessimistic scholars and higher education planners, and serious discussion over how to best react to the potential crises are common. As a matter of historical fact, however, almost no universities were closed before WW II in Japan. Out of 485 new universities established during the four decades since WW II, only two small private universities were closed and one national university, Tokyo University of Education, was closed but revived as the University of Tsukuba. Only 42 private junior colleges out of the 647 junior colleges established since 1951 were actually closed by 1987 (4). Although there were dramatic fluctuations in the college age population between the two baby booms following WW II, there has been no clear evidence to count these demographic changes to the death of Japan's colleges and universities (5).

In the United States, the demise of colleges and

universities has been commonplace throughout its history. For example, several hundred colleges were created and closed during the college movement prior to the Civil War (6). More recently, during the decade of the 1960s, when the college-age population (18-21 year old age group) increased from 9.5 million to 15 million, 162 colleges and universities were newly created and enrollments more than doubled from 3.6 million to 7.9 million, while 77 institutions (public 14, private 63) were closed. During the decade of the 1970s, when the college-age population increased from 14.5 million to 17.1 million and the number of enrolled students increased from 7.9 million to 11 million, 429 new colleges and universities were created while 153 other institutions (22 public, 131 private) were shut down. It is significant to note that even during a period with an increased college-age population, so many institutions were still closed. During the 1980s, when the 18-21 college-age population declined from 17.1 million in 1980 to 15.4 million in 1985, and in spite of predictions that 200 or more colleges would be closed (8), only about 30 colleges were actually closed by the middle of the decade, and the total number of students enrolled in colleges and universities even increased, primarily because of a significant increase of adult students aggressively recruited by colleges and universities. (9)

This might suggest that although there is a potential problem associated with demographic decline, institutions vital and flexible enough to seek out new sources of students (e.g.

adults) can overcome the potential crisis. The fact that most of the three thousand higher educational institutions in the United States have survived during the difficult decade of the 1980s suggests that institutions which are responding to the social needs of the age will not only survive, but may even prosper.

### 3. External Challenges

In the period from 1990 to 2000, Japanese higher education will face not only a declining college-age student pool, but also several fundamental structural changes in Japanese society. As was shown in the case of the American experience, demographic change, by itself, might not be a decisive factor in the institutional health of colleges and universities. However, if it occurs in conjunction with other external and internal changes, the aggregate of these changes may enormously influence the fate of higher education. This appears to be the situation in the Japanese case.

One of the most important external pressures is the so-called "internationalization" of Japanese society. As has already taken place in industry and the commercial world, Japanese colleges and universities are now faced with an increasing number of foreign students, foreign teachers and Japanese returnees from foreign countries who want to participate in Japanese higher education. The existence of the increasing number of foreign students and teachers requires a re-examination and reconstruction of traditional Japanese higher education which has, ever since its creation during the Meiji period (1868-1912), existed as a purely indigenous institution. While having learned Western civilization by both inviting foreign teachers and sending Japanese young students to study abroad, the Japanese leaders intended to build a "Japanese educational system for

Japanese own sake" through the process of modernization of Japan. After the complicated process of "Westernization" and "Japanization"(10), Japan has become a successful economic power in the world, and now in contrast with Meiji period, Japanese colleges and universities in the 1980s are faced with the challenges of accepting an increasing number of non-Japanese students, more than 80 percent of them coming from developing countries in Asia. These students come with strong aspirations and diversified expectations. Many of them are not always satisfied with the current living and academic environment, or with curriculum and teaching methods that are not designed to meet the needs of international students. They also find unsystematic Japanese language programs to be a problem(11). In 1983 the Japanese government decided on a "ten-fold increase policy" projecting 100,000 foreign students by the beginning of the 21st century. If the plan is realized, the existence of that number of foreign students may have an enormous impact on the educational system of Japanese universities and colleges.

At the same time, Japanese colleges and universities will have to compete in the rising international market for students in an age of declining population. More and more Japanese students are opting to study in foreign countries rather than attend marginal Japanese institutions. In addition, all but the best Japanese colleges and universities will be forced to compete with increasing numbers of American universities which have begun to recruit Japanese students either by building branch campuses

in Japan or by sending admission officers to Japan.

These pressures toward "internationalization" will require Japanese colleges and universities not only to open their doors to foreign students, but also to be subject to international evaluation. They will have to demonstrate their academic quality and standard in order to show that they are comparable to overseas schools in terms of academic credibility and degrees.

The "internationalization" of Japanese society means that Japan's universities cannot survive without more fully participating in the international higher education community. The increase of international competition in the industrial world has also had a great effect on traditional Japanese employment practices. Recently, structural changes have been occurring in the traditional "seniority" and "life-long employment" practices of the Japanese industry when recruiting new college graduates. Since the 1980s, major companies which had long recruited Japanese students only from prestigious Japanese universities began to recruit foreign professionals and college graduates of foreign universities. They have also been recruiting part-time workers, well-trained adults rather than fresh college graduates who require long and costly on-the-job training before they become valuable employees. Increasingly employers have found an urgent need to recruit experienced and uniquely talented people who can compete internationally.



These changes in the employment market will also force higher education to depart from traditional practices. In order to survive in a more internationally competitive world, Japanese industry needs dynamic, unique, and ambitious talents rather than the merely diligent, uniform, and bright young people who have traditionally been selected through higher education. Employers will come to expect colleges and universities to provide stronger education to students in areas relevant to their career needs. They will also demand that institutions of higher education strengthen their "added value" function rather than merely providing a "selection" function.

In predicting future trends, there are several important external factors which are not clear at this moment. One of the important factors is the direction of public policy. The fate of higher education in Japan is heavily dependent upon financial assistance from the central government. Private higher education, containing more than 70 percent both of institutions and students, is largely dependent upon tuition revenue from students and institutional aid from the government (12). Government subsidies to private institutions were only initiated in the 1970's, and now constitute around 20 percent of their total institutional expenditures.

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caused by the declining enrollments. Therefore, more generous public subsidies to these institutions will be a critical factor in their survival. However, at least at the present time, neither the legislature nor the executive have published a clear policy statement about this key subject. At the time of nation-wide campus unrest in the early 1970s, the leaders of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and their cabinet decided to initiate institutional financial aid to private colleges and universities because they feared that a combination of student disturbances in national and public-universities and a financial crisis in the private sector would cause more serious conflict and damage to Japanese higher education as a whole. This action was a dramatic reversal of the traditional policy of the Japanese government in which it concentrated human and financial resources only in national universities while ignoring the financial needs of the private sector. It is not, however, clear that the government will increase the budget for higher education for the sake of helping struggling institutions in the 1990s. Indeed, the direction of public policy toward higher education may be highly dependent upon the degree of public confidence in higher education, and at present it seems doubtful that Japanese universities will be successful in winning public trust. Therefore the future of the government's policy toward higher education seems to be problematic.

#### 4. Internal Challenges

Following the unprecedented rapid expansion of higher education in the past two decades, a change in what student applicants were seeking began in the mid-1970's. Although the desire to attend colleges and universities is still strong (with more than one out of three in the 18 year old population going on to traditional higher education), at the same time an increasing number of students are choosing to attend non-academic types of post-secondary educational institutions such as specialized vocational and technical schools (Semmon-gakko) and branch campuses of American universities in Japan. The diversification in high school students' college choices and career aspirations seems to be closely tied to such changes in society as the reform of the entrance examination system, shifts in the employment market, and the creation of popular departments and programs which reflect social and economic changes. In addition, after the mid-1970's and increasingly in the 1980's, it has become much more difficult for Japan's universities to obtain sufficient resources from either public or private sources. In this generally unfavorable situation there is growing dissatisfaction on the part of college students. Several empirical findings suggest that many students spend most of their college days very passively, without any serious motivation for independent learning. They find their curriculum irrelevant and are disappointed by the classes and lectures at the universities to which they worked so hard gain entrance (13). For instance, a

recent students' survey at the University of Tokyo showed that 37 percent of students expressed dissatisfaction with the classes, while more than 30 percent of students at private universities as a whole also voiced dissatisfaction with their classes (14). Thus, an increasing number of professors face the problem of how to deal with students who are poorly motivated, have passive attitudes toward their classes, and unclear goals about both academic life and their future careers .

In spite of the fact that a change in both teaching methods and the curriculum is clearly necessary due to increasing diversity of student attitudes and needs, very little has occurred in either the traditional practice of the university, or in the professor's attitude toward teaching. Many professors fail to attract students to their traditional lectures and turn to "research" in order to find meaning in their professional lives. At the same time, students uninterested in the traditional curriculum and boring lectures attempt to find meaning in extra-curricular activities.

The university has been slow to recognize that structural change in society requires corresponding change in curriculum, teaching, research and governance. It appears that a majority of the academic community have become so accustomed to a "growth-oriented" management style that they continue to assume that there will be an increase in student applications, and have not begun to make the adjustments necessary to cope with an age of

declining student enrollment and fewer available resources.

There are several strategies that university administrators can follow in the face of declining enrollments. Among them are the use of institutional "recruitment" campaigns, the application of marketing techniques, and the establishment of new departments and programs which are popular among prospective students. A large number of new programs - computer science, information science, business management, bio-technology, international relations, area studies etc., - have been created. Some of them are successful in attracting large numbers of student applicants. However, these approaches are, most often, based on the same assumptions as the traditional expansion model, and are merely "added on" to the existing structure of higher education. What is really needed is basic structural change which includes significant innovations for strengthening the basic function of education.

## 5. A Comparative Perspective

Most non-Japanese scholars wishing for an explanation of Japanese economic success, national efficiency and high productivity, as well as the superior achievement of Japanese high school students on international mathematics and science tests, tend to believe that Japanese education must be the major source of such success. But the general feeling of Japanese is that if Japan's schools and colleges are so excellent and so effective, why is there such deep dissatisfaction with education among the public, and why are there so many juku (private preparatory or remedial cram schools) and the examination industry, both of which are strong support systems to formal schooling, so prosperous? Finally, why is it necessary for most firms and the government to continue to invest such huge amounts of money in employee's "on the job" training?

If we examine the evaluation of Japanese education by non-Japanese critics, we find a common theme: that is, in sharp contrast to the high marks given to primary education, little evaluation has been done on higher education either in terms of its quality or its efficiency.

As was mentioned, the reform of Japan's educational system carried out immediately after World War II was heavily influenced by the American educational system and its underlying principles.

In the succeeding four decades, Japan has continued to look to the U.S. system as its model. Today, during 1980s as Japanese endeavors to reform the educational system, the suitability of the American model is being re-examined, along with everything else.

The United States, meanwhile, is paying more attention to Japanese education, motivated by the desire to find out the secret of Japan's vigorous economic growth and success in technological innovation. That Americans, who have possessed unrivaled influence over world affairs, politically, economically, and culturally since the end of the war, should feel their position of prominence threatened by Japan, a vanquished nation, and try to find the source of Japanese strength in its education system is among the great ironies of history.

In 1983, it was proposed that a cooperative study of education be undertaken in the two countries, and a study group was set up in Japan by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and another in the United States by the Department of Education. In January 1987, the respective teams released reports.

The American report is quite critical of Japanese higher education, calling it "the weakest part of the entire system" (15). It says higher education is far less efficient than any



other part of the educational system - including the primary and secondary schools, juku, preparatory schools, as well as corporate education. It observes the various negative effects that the university entrance examination system, with its intense competition, has on school education in general. The report also says the undergraduate curriculum, especially for freshmen and sophomores, is seriously flawed, both in terms of the system as a whole and in the quality of instruction. Institutions of higher education are not open to adults desiring to further or continue their education, and they lag behind in the internationalization of faculties and campus facilities as well. Graduate schools, which ought to play a leading role in conducting basic research and developing technical expertise, are behind the times. It notes the consensus in Japan that the higher education system is neither meeting the needs of the people at a time when the world is in the throes of rapid change nor responding to the concerns of Japanese youth.

The report cites Edwin O. Reischauer's criticism: "The squandering of four years at the college level on poor teaching and very little study seems an incredible waste of time for a nation so passionately devoted to efficiency". Perhaps the "inefficiency" of Japanese higher education seems "incredible" because there is such a great gap between the quality of elementary and secondary education on the one hand and higher education on the other. Another reason may be that it is probably hard for Americans to understand how the whole of Japanese

education, despite the poor quality of the postsecondary system, functions so well all the same, helping to give Japan its prosperous society.

The American comments reveal a considerable gap in the American and Japanese views of education and of the role of the university. From the American viewpoint, to spend the first two years of college life relaxing is a waste of time. Japanese traditionally view the early stage of higher education as a transition from "schooling" to "scholarship", the basic premise being that college students, who acquired the capacity to learn and to discipline themselves academically in high school, should be left free to study on their own initiative. They have entered university after twelve years of school education, having learned to endure intense competition, to study diligently, and tolerate externally imposed restraints. It is only natural that they should seek some relief and freedom from the restrictions after entering university. Considering the even more heavy demands awaiting them in full-time employment once they graduate, the opportunity to relax and enjoy life after gaining entrance to university may be crucial to Japanese youth in adjusting to society.

Even though the first two years of university life are thought of as a period of relative ease and relaxation on the part of students, it does not mean that the faculty are lax or that students learn little. Japanese universities, especially in

the fields of social sciences and humanities, try to leave students as much free time as possible and avoid imposing restraints upon them so that they will learn to cultivate individual initiative and motivation. This, indeed, is considered the important function of the university. Professors do not exert the kind of heavy pressure to study on students that their American counterparts do and they keep their involvement with students to a minimum.

In fact, the greatest difference between Japanese and American education lies in which phase of the system - secondary or postsecondary - functions to provide the instruction and discipline that nurtures scholastic aptitude. In Japan, scholastic aptitude is instilled before, and in the United States, after, entering university. Non-scholastic aptitudes, which are allowed to develop during high school as well as in college in the United States, are in Japan at last given a chance to blossom only once the student has entered university. The quality and function of higher education cannot be appropriately discussed without considering the difference between the two educational systems and the roles they play in the two countries. When comparing high schools in Japan and the United States, a Japanese would probably cite the same criticism of American high schools that the Americans aim at the Japanese university system. The educational systems of both countries are determined by the particular traditions and the social conditions and needs of each country.

## 6. Conclusion

The changes described earlier are fundamentally new and different from what Japanese higher education experienced during the decades right after WW II. For the first time in the history of postwar higher education, Japanese universities have begun to move from a "seller's market" to a "buyer's market", in which students will be "courted customers" rather than "supplicants for admission" by the term of David Riesman. This is similar to the American situation in the 1980s(16).

In the coming age of declining enrollment, a substantial number of marginal institutions will be forced to make a strong effort to attract not only traditional full-time students but also non-traditional part-time students. In order to attract enough of these non-traditional clients, these institutions will have to develop new and flexible curriculum and teaching methods to strengthen the "added value" function. The days of simply emphasizing the traditional "screening" function are over for Japanese higher education.

All these changes will be taking place in Japan beginning in the 1990s. These changes will require Japanese institutions of higher education (for the first time since 1945) to fundamentally overhaul their basic assumptions and to pursue innovative approaches in both academic affairs and management. In one sense,

this will be a serious challenge to traditional Japanese higher education, but the decade ahead will also be a time for opportunity. As Eric Ashby warned, the danger is "not that universities fail to respond adequately to the short-term demands of an age of technology", but "just the opposite danger: that in responding so readily and so efficiently they will run the risk of self-disintegration through too facile an adaptation to tomorrow's world" (14). Only those who understand the implication of the changes and are brave enough to take up these new challenges without losing their identity as "universities" may not only survive but also even prosper in a time of decline (17).

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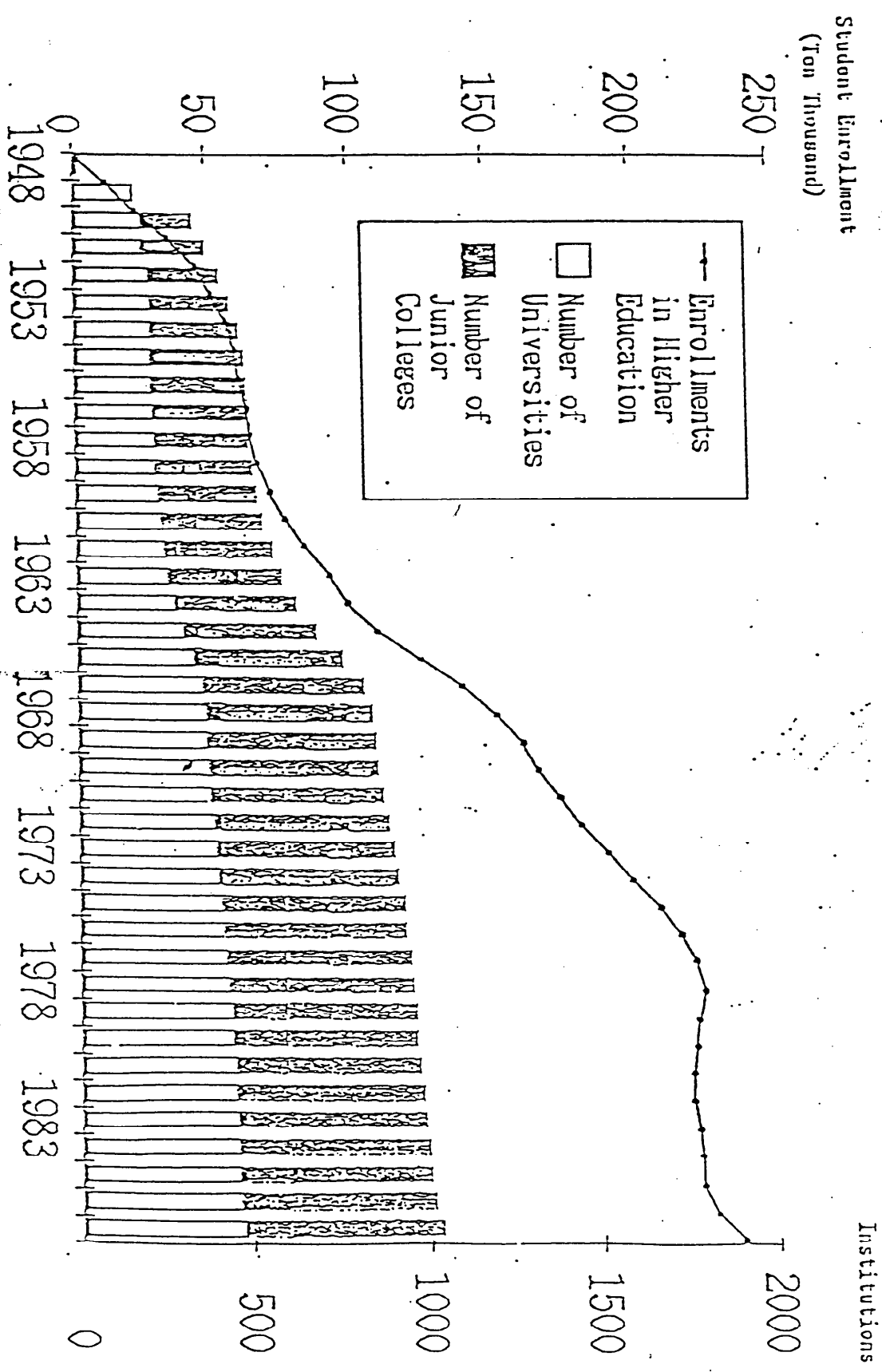
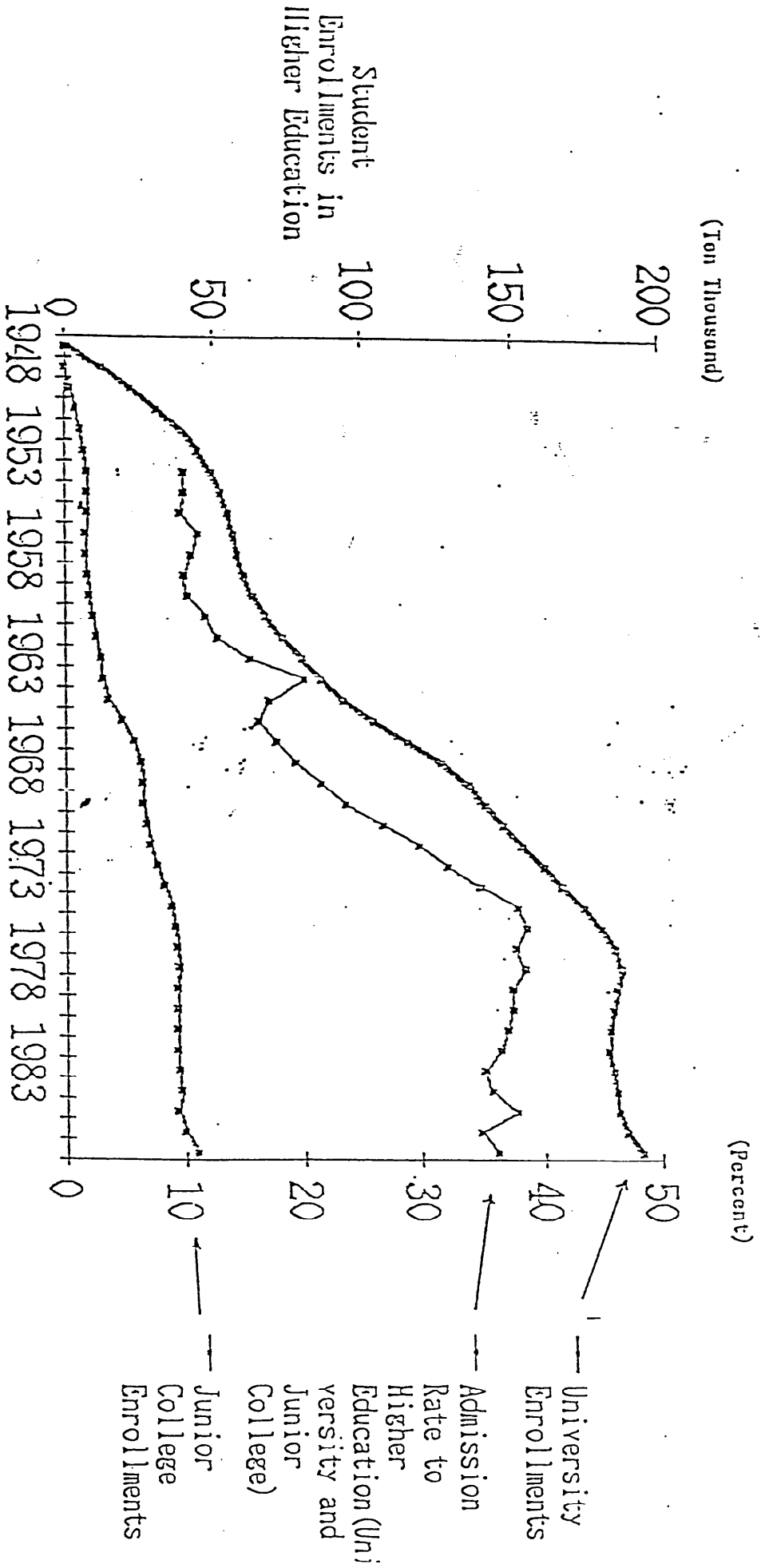
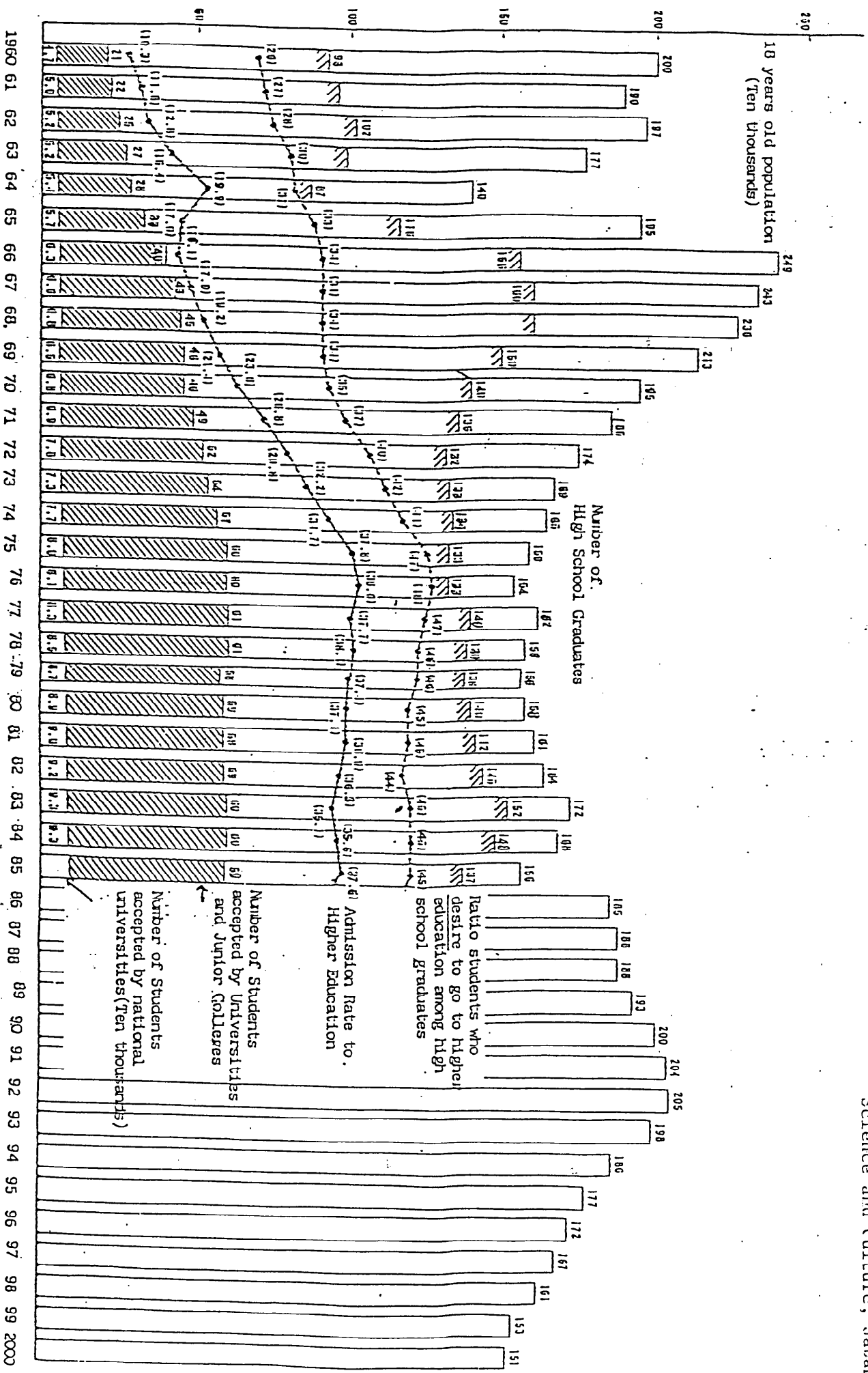


Chart [Part II] Enrollments in Higher Education



[Chart II] Trends in Japanese Higher Education 1960-2000

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Japan



## RIHE WORKING PAPERS

- No.1 Kazuyuki Kitamura, *The Future of Japanese Higher Education*. March 1989. 33 pages.
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