

Much Fuss about Almost Nothing: The 2015 Japanese Governmental Call to Abolish Humanities and Social Programs in Japanese Universities

Beginning in June 2015 and extending into 2016, Japanese and foreign news media reported that the government of Japan under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had “ordered” Japanese national universities either to abolish their humanities and social science programs (hereafter HSS) or to redirect them to more practical or even vocational studies. The media saw this alleged order as a “dumbing down” of Japanese higher education. Many went further, linking the order to what were said to be the “right-wing” and “anti-intellectual” policies of Prime Minister Abe.

The mistaken belief that the Ministry of Education (MEXT) had ordered the abolition of HSS programs in national universities led to statements in opposition from the Science Council of Japan, the Japan Business Federation, and other non-governmental organizations, as well as public statements from the presidents of the two most prestigious national universities (Tokyo and Kyoto) that their institutions were going to ignore the order. Two books on the subject quickly appeared, and two magazines, *Chuokoron* and *Gendai Shiso*, published special issues focusing on the alleged abolition policy.

Building largely on one highly critical English language report in the *Japan Times* and one misinterpreted report in the English language version of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, foreign language news media and educational-policy websites presented an image of the Japanese government, and Abe Shinzo in particular, as waging war on HSS in Japanese universities.

In addition, a British academic started a petition to the then education minister Hakubun Shimomura asking him to [“Reconsider the Closure of Social Sciences and Humanities Faculties in Japan.”](#) As of November 2016 it had attracted more than 1700 signatures.

Even though by that date it had become clear that there had been no order to abolish HSS programs, MEXT took the petition and foreign reports seriously and issued a rebuttal and denial in English. Individual MEXT officials fluent in English also explained that there had been no order to abolish HSS programs and that the directive actually was aimed at encouraging such programs. Within Japan, both Minister Shimomura and his successor, Hiroshi Hase, explicitly denied any intent to abolish HSS programs in national universities.

The unbalanced reporting was all based on two lines in a text that is roughly ten pages in printed form. My direct translation of these two lines follows.

Universities will endeavor to promptly reform their organization with respect to their social function, special character, and strengths that were made clear when they engaged in the “mission redefinition” exercise. Especially with respect to teacher training and HSS departments at the under graduate and graduate level, in

consideration of the declining eighteen-year old population, the demand for graduates and the need to maintain standards, universities should proactively draw up plans for structural reform and review considering their role as national institutions including phasing out structures or shifting resources to areas of higher social need.

Although the wording of the statement is exceedingly awkward, the meaning should have been largely understood by anyone who has read MEXT calls for reform.

Most of the misunderstanding originated with the term *haishi*. I have translated this as “phase out” rather than “abolish.” Universities have an obligation to graduate students in a program and so cannot immediately abolish programs arbitrarily. Moreover, when structures or programs are “abolished,” the faculty and nearly all of the courses are reassigned to a new or existing structure or program. I personally experienced this several times during my eighteen years of teaching in a Japanese university.

Ultimately, most universities subject to this directive reshuffled their HSS programs and [cut their intake quotas](#) by about ten percent. In line with MEXT desiderata, there was an increased emphasis on internationalization or regional development and joint programs between HSS and science or engineering. Even the University of Tokyo, which said it would not comply with the MEXT “order,” in fact “abolished” four programs and [replaced them with a new department](#) with the same content and the same intake quota. In other words, nothing much happened.

While foreign journalists can perhaps be excused for relying on flawed Japanese news reports, the reaction to the MEXT directive even by specialists in Japanese education deserves both analysis and severe criticism.

First, even if the MEXT directive was taken literally as calling upon Japanese national universities to totally eliminate all HSS programs, such abolition would have had only a marginal impact on the teaching and study of these subjects. This is for the simple reason that most HSS students are in the private sector, as shown in the chart below.

Students by Subject Area and Category of University or College in 2015

	Total	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Arts
National	17.5%	8.4%	8.2%	35.7%	4.9%
Public	5.1%	5.4%	4.1%	1.4%	8.3%
Private	77.4%	86.2%	87.7%	63.1%	86.8%

Second, a call to literally abolish HSS programs in Japanese national universities would be absurd in light of the MEXT categories. The humanities are defined by MEXT as comprising philosophy, literature, linguistics, human geography, and anthropology. The social sciences comprise law, political science, economics, management, sociology, psychology, and education. The idea that a political and bureaucratic elite that comes predominantly from the law and economic courses of national universities would be calling for the abolition of these programs is risible on its face.

In the same vein, no observers noted that a literal call to abolish HSS programs would have meant shutting down one entire national university: Hitotsubashi. Hitotsubashi is the only Japanese national university specializing in HSS. Without those programs, Hitotsubashi would cease to exist. Even so, no Hitotsubashi representatives spoke against the MEXT directive. This suggests that they fully understood that there was no general order to abolish HSS programs.

The only programs that can be regarded as being phased out in the sense implied by the term “abolish” were those covered by the Japanese academic jargon terms *zeromen* (no [teaching] credential) or *shinkatei* (new courses). These programs were created beginning in the 1980s at the behest of the education ministry as a way for universities to utilize surplus faculty while holding on to their intake quotas and associated budgets. National universities started phasing them out on their own initiative beginning in 2006. In its directive, MEXT was simply telling those universities to follow a trend already well underway.

Puzzlingly, MEXT said essentially the same thing in 2014 as it did in 2015, but in 2014 the directive went essentially unnoticed.

The most persuasive explanation for the hysteria in 2015 comes from Shunya Yoshimi, a professor and vice president at Tokyo University, who notes that several elements in the political environment had changed between 2014 and 2015:

- distrust of PM Abe in reaction to his reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution and his pushing through of the state secrets law;
- distrust of MEXT because of its repeated bungling of preparations for the 2020 Olympics;
- distrust of Education Minister Shimomura, who had called upon national universities to display the national flag and sing the national anthem at public ceremonies;
- a general feeling that the HSS were under threat because they could not demonstrate their economic utility, particularly when science and technology were seen as the key to Japan breaking out of decades of economic malaise.

Of these factors, the association of the misinterpreted MEXT policy with the alleged right-wing revisionist agenda of Abe and Shimomura was widespread in both English and Japanese. Some went so far as to equate the HSS policy with the actions of the 1930s Nazi regime.

There is no evidence to link PM Abe to the MEXT directive, which appears to be entirely bureaucratic in origin. Although Abe has in fact said relatively little about higher education, that did not stop commentators from making such a linkage. A single short paragraph from a 2014 OECD speech was seized upon to proclaim that Abe wanted to turn universities into vocational schools.

Rather than deepening academic research that is highly theoretical, we will conduct more practical vocational education that better anticipates the needs of society. I intend to incorporate that kind of new framework into higher education.

However, immediately before this utterance, Abe had said:

We must first rid ourselves of the notion that “only engineering brings about innovation.” Society is becoming increasingly complex. We live in an era that demands a broad-based background, including knowledge of management and psychology and being well-versed culturally.

As an example of what he meant by this, Abe offered the development of the compact disk by SONY under the leadership of Norio Ohga, who was a graduate of the Tokyo University of the Arts and had aspired to be an opera singer before going into the corporate world. In other words, those commentators who seized upon the single statement about “practical vocational education” while ignoring his other statements were being intellectually dishonest.

In their rush to use their misreading of the MEXT directive as a cudgel with which to bash Abe, critics failed to note that the same directive called for greater employment of women, young people, and foreign nationals, strengthening support for foreign students and those with disabilities, the promotion of foreign study on the part of Japanese, the greater use of English in instruction, more interdisciplinary teaching and research, and various other items usually considered to be part of a progressive agenda.

To be sure, neither Abe nor MEXT are above criticism. But criticism should be directed at what they are doing in reality, and not at what it is simply imagined that they are doing.