



Higher education reform in Japan – update

Significant education reform is ongoing in Japan, as part of the government’s “Abenomics” agenda to revitalise the economy and respond to demographic challenges.

2014 saw the implementation of the *Top Global University* program – with funding to 37 Japanese universities for internationalisation – and the innovative *Tobitate!* study abroad program. Both are designed to help Japan meet targets which include doubling the number of inbound and outbound students by 2020 (see previous briefs [here](#)).

Two new areas of significant higher education reform have opened up in 2015, as summarised below. Further information is also provided below on other policy changes, emerging trends and examples of higher education internationalisation in Japan.

For more information contact Paul Harris, Counsellor (Education and Science) at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo. Other policy updates and contact details are available [here](#).

1. Reform of Japanese national universities

The Japanese government is pushing ahead with new measures to drive “drastic reform” of Japan’s 86 national universities. During 2015, all national universities will be asked to self-nominate in one of three new categories:

- i. Universities with world-class teaching and research
- ii. Universities with world-class teaching and research in specific fields
- iii. Universities contributing to revitalising the local economy.

Universities will then be evaluated and funded based on standards devised for each category. The new system is to be operating by 2018, with university presidents also given additional funding and autonomy to manage institutions.

Separately, the government’s Council on Industrial Competitiveness has recommended that research-intensive universities be given more freedom to raise fees and work more closely with industry.

2. Vocational education an increasing focus

As part of broader education reform, the Japanese government is putting increasing emphasis on vocational education in 2015. Education Minister Shimomura has asked the Central Education Committee to examine the case for a new class of higher education institution in Japan to boost “practical vocational training”. This has been referred to as a new kind of “professional university” that could offer Bachelor’s degrees and two-year Diplomas, and be operational by 2017.

The government is now investigating what kind of institutions and degrees are most needed, and how best to assure quality. It is expected that some existing universities and vocational colleges would seek to transition to the new model. MEXT is also funding universities to develop new programs for “vocational education and practical skills” targeted at working people and mature-age students, including industry internships.

Other recent policy changes:

- MEXT has revised regulation to permit joint degree programs between Japanese and international universities – the guidelines are now available in English [here](#).
- MEXT has also introduced a new performance-based funding system for Japan’s 52 university law schools for the first time, which has seen a reduction in funding to 42 and an increase to only 10 (Waseda, Hitotsubashi, Tokyo, Kyoto, Keio, Hokkaido, Osaka, Doshisha, Sophia and Kobe).

Other examples and emerging trends:

- Study abroad numbers increasing – most recent MEXT survey shows growth in the number of Japanese students going overseas to study, with China overtaking the USA for the first time as the most popular destination
- *Tobitate!* study abroad program expanded and extended to senior secondary students in 2015 – to date 100 Japanese companies have donated over \$100 million to expand the pool of scholarships
- English-language education delivered at schools and universities by private providers and vocational institutions – increasing numbers of partnerships to boost English-language education capacity (April 2015 MEXT survey showed that almost 75% of Japanese senior high school students have middle-school English abilities)
- School and university mergers – MEXT supporting mergers between primary and junior high schools in areas with declining population, and between local private universities (with extra funding)
- New academic calendars – for example Chiba University moving to a six semester system from 2016
- Online education – University of Tokyo and Fuji Xerox partnership to develop a new system for delivering online courses.