

Universities get yen for ranking

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The central government recently announced funding for 37 leading public and private universities as a way to increase their global ranking and competitiveness. The 37 chosen universities will receive annual grants for up to 10 years to increase the number of foreign teachers, raise admissions from overseas and, if all goes right, improve the international ranking of Japanese universities.

Though the intention and purpose is right, problems loom with the large-scale project. While 37 universities were selected, no mention was made of the other 67 schools that applied. Those chosen were the largest universities, which means more money was given to schools with already large budgets. Smaller universities or those with a teaching-based or liberal arts curriculum were left out.

The allocation of new funds included a new ranking of universities into type A or type B, based on how likely the central government thought they were to be able to internationalize. Ranking universities in this way seems to add another element to the already competitive nature of higher education in Japan. Coordination between universities about programs and techniques would be a positive step, but that seems unlikely.

Plans for hiring more foreign faculty, for expanding study abroad programs and for developing more courses and programs in English or other languages are all admirable undertakings. But simply counting the number of publications or foreign teachers will not be enough. Tacking the word “global” on to current practices is meaningless.

What really matters is how students are taught. A greater focus on teaching students how to think, act and function in global settings should come first. Improving the quality of research through grants or other financial support may end up benefiting professors’ careers more than students’ learning. Focusing on students will have more globalizing effects than churning out research papers.

To really globalize education, students need to undertake challenges that are the norm in universities worldwide. Students must be supported to study abroad, learn other languages and acquire experience through internships that connect them to the wider world. Individual research, group projects, and critical and creative assignments are still more common abroad than in Japan. Allowing students greater autonomy in actively directing their own course of study, rather than having them sit passively in large lecture halls, would be a solid step forward.

Creating learning environments rich with global experiences will mean that professors, administrators and staff must first globalize themselves. Reorganizing departments, updating curriculum and holding professors accountable for the quality of their teaching are important steps. Learning from other countries’ success and failures is important, too.

Globalizing universities will not be easy. It will require changing the current thinking about education and its practices at the deepest, and highest, levels.