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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

DEI in Japanese Higher Education: Visible Progress, but a Long Journey Ahead

Lilan Chen and Lizhou Wang

This study examines Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) implementation in Japanese higher education. An analysis of governmental policies, initiatives, university DEI declarations, and DEI center operations shows that, while DEI is promoted in response to demographic shifts, globalization, and the social inclusion agenda, implementation relies heavily on project-based funding, numerical targets, and symbolic structures. This article outlines both the progress that has been achieved and the need for expanded diversity dimensions to address structural inequities.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has emerged as a defining theme in higher education worldwide, often positioned simultaneously as a moral imperative and a strategic tool for institutional excellence. However, DEI research and practices now face unprecedented challenges, exemplified by recent anti-DEI legislation in the United States that has affected university policies and practices. More critically, significant gaps remain in understanding how DEI concepts, predominantly developed within Western contexts, are interpreted and applied across diverse national settings. Such disparity is especially pronounced in East Asian societies, where cultural values, demographic compositions, and institutional structures create different DEI contexts. Japan thus represents a compelling case for examining how DEI is translated from global discourse into the national and institutional context, and to what extent it addresses structural inequities. By critically analyzing governmental policies, government-led initiatives, university DEI declarations and statements, and the operational practices of DEI centers, this study highlights both the progress made and the limitations that persist in embedding DEI into the cultural and structural fabric of Japanese universities.

The Japanese Context

The emergence of DEI policies in Japanese higher education is rooted in both global and domestic contexts. At the global level, increasing internationalization of science and higher education has pressured Japan to strengthen its competitiveness by fostering diverse talent, enhancing research capacity, and aligning with global discourses on inclusivity and social sustainability. Simultaneously, the national agenda has been shaped by urgent demographic and socioeconomic challenges, including rapid population decline, labor shortages, and the declining vitality of regional communities.

These conditions have positioned universities as key sites for cultivating diverse human capital, revitalizing local society, and improving gender equality in research and academic leadership. Policy initiatives such as the Top Global University Initiative, the Basic Plan for Gender Equality, and the Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education collectively reflect these imperatives, framing DEI as both an instrument of global competitiveness and a foundation for building a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Implementation: Visible Progress, But Not Mainstream

The implementation of DEI in Japanese higher education has largely been driven by top-down policy initiatives, reflecting the strong role of governmental bodies in steering institutional priorities. Government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology, the Japan Science & Technology Agency, and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, not only allocate project-based funding aimed at encouraging DEI but also frame DEI as an instrument for enhancing research excellence, innovation, and international competitiveness. This has led to a proliferation of competitive, time-limited projects that encourage universities to demonstrate progress through measurable outputs, such as the number of women hired in academic posts, the recruitment of international faculty, or the proportion of students participating in global mobility programs. While these indicators offer a sense of progress, they often risk reducing DEI to a numerical exercise, sidelining deeper questions of structural and cultural reform.

At the institutional level, universities have responded by establishing organizational structures—most notably DEI centers—that are tasked with promoting inclusion across campus. These centers typically coordinate awareness-raising campaigns, training programs, and workshops, often in collaboration with other faculties or external partners. For instance, Tohoku University's Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion provides structured information on DEI-related

classes and training opportunities, while Hiroshima University's Institute for Diversity and Inclusion actively collaborates with other universities to organize research meetings on *Tabunka kyosei* (multicultural coexistence). Nevertheless, these efforts are often fragmented, lacking systematic integration into core university governance and policy-making structures. Many DEI centers remain small in scale, staffed with a limited number of full-time members, and hold only advisory rather than executive authority within university hierarchies.

Beyond campus boundaries, some institutions have pursued partnerships with local communities, municipalities, and even overseas universities to frame DEI as a socially impactful agenda. For example, initiatives such as the Multicultural Campus Project Toward Social Impact highlight the potential of universities to foster broader multicultural coexistence through curriculum development and community engagement. Yet, these collaborations often mirror the same project-based and symbolic tendencies that characterize national initiatives. Their sustainability is contingent on external funding and leadership enthusiasm rather than long-term institutional commitment.

Current Issues: Single Focus and Under-Resourced

Despite visible progress in recent years, many issues remain in the promotion of DEI within Japanese higher education. Firstly, some universities have articulated the concepts and definitions of various underrepresented groups only in theory. For example, the University of Osaka has defined the groups of SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer). However, practical diversity initiatives in Japanese higher education remain predominantly focused on increasing female representation, while other dimensions of gender diversity are largely overlooked. This might correspond to the fact that, in Japan, the share of females entering STEM fields is the smallest among OECD and partner countries. The pattern, therefore, may reflect important diversity priorities while simultaneously limiting broader intersectional approaches to inclusion. Other factors, such as economic background, regional origin, and disability status, which also present significant barriers to educational access, are likewise largely overlooked.

Another key problem lies in the overreliance on project-based funding schemes and short-term initiatives, which often generate temporary visibility without embedding sustainable structural change. The emphasis on quantifiable indicators, including the number of women researchers hired, international students enrolled, or faculty completing DEI training, reinforces a tendency to equate progress with numerical outputs, while questions of cultural transformation and institutional reform remain insufficiently addressed. DEI centers, though symbolically important, are typically under-resourced and hold limited decision-making authority, leaving them constrained to activities such as awareness-raising, seminars, and workshops that may not significantly reshape the organizational culture.

Universities thus remain caught between the dual imperatives of responding to governmental expectations and addressing the lived realities of underrepresented groups (e.g., female students and faculty, next generation students [*Jisedai Ikusei*], and LGBTQ communities), with the former typically taking precedence. This imbalance highlights the need for a more sustained, systemic integration of DEI principles into the governance, curricula, and everyday practices of universities, beyond symbolic gestures or compliance with state-driven key performance indicators.

Future DEI Directions for Japan

This analysis demonstrates that Japanese higher education is developing pragmatic DEI approaches that reflect the country's unique demographic needs and global positioning. Universities have established DEI infrastructure, including centers, training programs, and measurement frameworks, that represent progress in institutionalizing diversity commitments. Yet these structures remain largely symbolic, under-resourced, and tied to short-term, project-based funding that prioritizes numerical targets over cultural transformation. The current focus on gender equity reflects urgent national priorities, but also reveals a need to expand diversity dimensions to include socioeconomic, regional, and accessibility considerations. Significant potential exists for addressing broader structural inequities through continued investment in comprehensive governance structures, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and sustained institutional commitment to transformative change.

Lilan Chen is specially appointed assistant professor at the Center for Student Success Research and Practice, University of Osaka, Japan. E-mail: lilanchen.slics@osaka-u.ac.jp. Lizhou Wang is assistant professor at the Waseda Institute for Advanced Study, Waseda University, Japan. E-mail: wang.lizhou@aoni.waseda.jp. This work is supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Kakenhi (Project Number 24K16708).