

“Exposure abroad : key to success for youth”

By Mizuho Aoki, Staff Writer, Japan Times

While the nation's universities struggle to get more foreign students to enroll in their schools and internationalize their student population, some raise concern towards the trend where more Japanese students stay close to home rather than studying abroad and avoid new challenges.

Observing such increasingly inward-looking nature of young people, a prominent scholar on international business urge more students to face challenges in a different culture when their sensitivity is high.

“The younger generation in general have much sharper or higher sensitivity to things that are new. So, if they come across something new, something inspiring, something very different from what they are used to, these things, tend to make a greater impact on them,” said Yoko Ishikura, professor at the Hitotsubashi University Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy.

Ishikura is the first Japanese woman to receive a doctorate in business administration from Harvard Business School in the 1980s and one of very few Japanese who has been playing moderator roles at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos for the past decade.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation, the number of students studying at higher education institutions outside their home country marked a record high 3 million in 2007.

But the trend in Japan is heading for the opposite direction. According to an education ministry report in 2010, the number of Japanese going abroad has been declining for three consecutive years from 82,945 in 2003 to 75,156 in 2007.

“I'm concerned. Because overall, Japan is becoming very much internally oriented. They focus on domestic issues and they worry about their near surroundings only. When, in fact, the world is becoming much more interconnected and much more open,” said Ishikura at a recent interview with The Japan Times in Tokyo.

Noting that her first oversea experience in Kansas in the United States, where she stayed for a year as an exchange students during her college years, made a lot of impact and gave her confidence that she didn't have before then, Ishikura said Japanese youth should be exposed to many different things as possible even if it comes with a lot of pain and headache.

The professor also argued that they need to have more broader view and should not limit themselves to the domestic market for finding a job, especially in the time when Japan is aging very quickly.

Currently, "even though we are in Asia, which is the growing engine for the whole world economy, Japan is not a part of it," Ishikura noted.

Over the past decade as she attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Ishikura observes that Japan's presence in the world is declining in the international scene.

Back in the early 2000s, when she began attending the forum, there were many prominent Japanese business leaders who had ability to communicate without scripts and express their own views, said Ishikura, naming Nobuyuki Idei, former CEO of Sony Corp., and Minoru Makihara, chairman of Mitsubishi Corp., as such examples. But today, Ishikura says there are only a few Japanese business leaders who can state their views at such international conferences, she said.

Meanwhile, Ishikura sees the increase of Chinese and South Korean business leaders who are becoming good communicators in recent years.

"About 10 years ago, they were still speaking in their own languages through interpreters. ••But now they understand the rules of the game. They speak in English, they know how to express (their views) and they are tough," Ishikura said. "They don't give up or give in that easily. They argue. I think that comes with some experiences and practices."

Referring to the declining number of Japanese studying abroad as one symptom of the bigger problem that Japan is faced with, Ishikura said: "If Japan continues to be like this, the country will lose its presence (in the world stage.) Because if you don't go out, you don't see and you don't understand that the presence of Japan is declining."

Ishikura believes several measures can be taken to help change the inward-looking nature of Japanese youth.

One is to make sure parents or older generations let the young decide or to make a choice on their own and let them take responsibility of the consequences, said Ishikura.

The second is to provide young people with opportunities to interact or see people who are following their hearts and doing a lot of things, because passion or enthusiasm is very contagious, Ishikura said.

"For example, Steve Job's commencement address (at Stanford University in 2005) was so inspiring and so impressive. Just by looking at it just moves you. If they interact with those people when they are young, I think they see that they can do something like that," explained Ishikura.

"What I don't like is that the 'young Japanese' seem to give up dreams much too early and not being unrealistic," Ishikura said.

"I think the beauty of being young is being unrealistic. I think that's the privilege of being young. ••Unless you are unrealistic, nothing will happen. A lot of people may say 'you are so

crazy,' but they are the ones who would do something great. That makes life very much fun."

