

Japan's Human-Centered Learning in the Age of AI

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD

Japan's education sector is entering a period of profound reinvention. Long admired for academic discipline, social stability and broad access to schooling, the country is now confronting a new set of questions. How should universities prepare students for a world shaped by AI? How can they attract global talent while preserving the distinctive value of studying in Japan? How can education support regional communities in a society facing demographic decline? At Kobe University, President Masato Fujisawa sees internationalization, research and regional development as closely connected. Located in one of Japan's most livable port cities, the university is strengthening English-taught programs, global partnerships and research in fields such as medical engineering, bioengineering, biotechnology and biomembranes.

"By building a strong academic and living environment, we aim to make Kobe University an attractive destination for people from around the world," Fujisawa said. Nihon University, led by President Shinichiro Ohnuki, Ph.D., approaches global education through authenticity as much as accessibility. For Ohnuki, Japan's international appeal lies in not simply adopting the approaches of English-speaking countries, but in offering students a meaningful encounter with Japanese culture, society and knowledge. "True globalization means creating something of genuine value and expressing it authentically, while still being able to connect with people around the world," he said. To meet global knowledge needs, Japan's education and corporate systems must become more flexible, international and inter-

disciplinary. The University of Tokyo President Teruo Fujii argues that universities should support lifelong learning, attract global talent and prepare students to design their future society through dialogue, diversity and collaboration across fields. "Considering the global situation, it is important that we more actively provide perspectives from Asia and Japan to higher education internationally," he said. Toyo University adds a human-centered voice to the debate.

President Etsuko Yaguchi, Ph.D., argues that AI makes the university's founding philosophy, rooted in the belief that philosophy is the basis of all learning, more relevant than ever. "Universities must help students become fulfilled human beings," she said. "They must help students think about how they want to live, what kind of society they want to create, and what values should guide their actions."

YARUKI Switch Group extends the same conversation into childhood education and private-sector innovation. President and CEO Naoshi Takahashi says Japan must move beyond a narrow focus on exams and academic advancement. "The question is no longer only whether children can enter a good school or university," he said. "It is also whether they can think for themselves, communicate, adapt, and build fulfilling lives." Together, these organizations show an education system in transition. From national research universities to private child-development platforms, Japan is seeking to prepare learners not only for the next exam, degree or job, but for a future that will demand judgment, creativity, resilience and a deeper understanding of what it means to live well.



Toyo University Champions Human-Centered AI Education

Built on founder Enryo Inoue's belief that "the basis of all learning lies in philosophy," Toyo University combines values-driven education, critical thinking and practical learning to help students discover fulfillment, contribute to society and realize their full potential. BY CIAN O'NEILL AND BERNARD THOMPSON

As technology like AI changes the way we interact with the world, the role of academic institutions in shaping minds, both young and old, has never been more important. President Etsuko Yaguchi, Ph.D., says that Toyo University's founding philosophy grows ever more relevant as economic and societal pressures push universities to produce workers rather than people. "Universities must help students become fulfilled human beings," she said. "They must help students think about how they want to live, what kind of society they want to create, and what values should guide their actions." This is evident in the university's approach to integrating exchange students into academic life. International students integrate with their Japanese peers through modern residence halls, where they live together; and through cultural activities and language

support programs. Both Japanese and international students benefit from the experience of multicultural coexistence and develop empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives. At the same time, the university is approaching AI as a tool for learning and enrichment, rather than a human replacement. "As technology becomes more powerful, the importance of human judgment and ethical awareness becomes even greater," Yaguchi said. Toyo University teaches students how to make effective use of technology and how to think critically and ethically about its use. Drawing on that more than a century-old philosophy, Yaguchi affirms the university's mission: "As we move toward the 22nd century, I believe universities that continue emphasizing humanity, ethics, reflection, and social responsibility will become even more valuable."



"I believe the next stage for Japanese universities is to build lifelong learning systems that fit those cultural strengths while adapting to the realities of the future."

Etsuko Yaguchi, Ph.D.
President, Toyo University.

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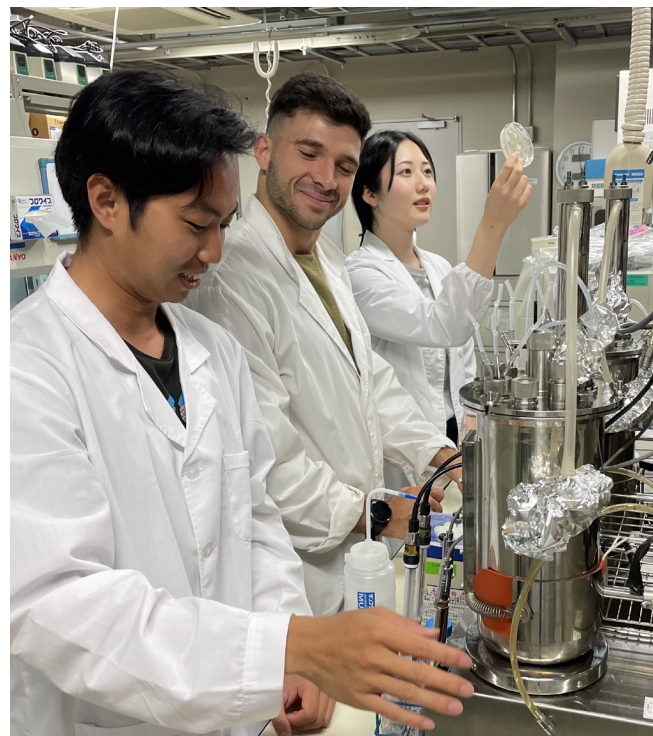




Kobe University Drives Global Education, Research and Innovation



<https://www.kobe-u.ac.jp/en/>



Kobe University welcomes global students and researchers to Japan, combining academic excellence, international collaboration and innovation in Kobe, one of Asia's most livable cities.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, KYANN EDOUARD AND BERNARD THOMPSON

For more than 120 years, Kobe University has grown alongside the city that shares its name. Founded in 1902 as Kobe Higher Commercial School, it was established as Kobe University in 1949 and has become one of the nation's leading national research universities, with 11 faculties and 14 graduate schools spanning the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, life sciences and medicine.

Kobe itself is the perfect host for an international-facing university. The port has long been a place of cultural exchange, known for its openness, livability and access to the wider Kansai region. For students and researchers coming from abroad, University President Masato Fujisawa said that the environment is complemented by the advantages of studying in Japan. "Japan is consistently regarded as one of the safest countries in the world, which gives students and their families a strong sense of security," he said. "The overall living environment is very stable and comfortable."

Now, the university is positioning itself as an international campus as it continues to develop English-taught programs across various disciplines. Its Center for Global Engagement provides Japanese language education, study and life advising, internship and career support and alumni networking for international students. Beyond the classroom, the university partners with 405 institutions in 64 countries and regions, becoming a platform for joint research, student exchange and international collaboration.

Kobe University centers its research activities on fields such as medical engineering, bio-engineering, biotechnology and biomembranes, while the Institute for Digital Bio Life Science Research Park supports advanced work across disciplines. Its Institute for Academic Research and Co-Creative Innovation connects researchers with companies, local governments and entrepreneurs to turn discoveries into social value.

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Fujisawa ties the university's mission to Kobe itself. As Japan faces population decline, Kobe University aims to attract talented students and researchers from around the world to the city to support new industries and sustain the region. "Universities need to ensure that their academic work has real-world impact and supports economic and social development."



YARUKI Switch Group

YARUKI Switch Group's Global Education Strategy

YARUKI Switch Group combines Japan's education know-how, multi-brand growth and global ambition to prepare children for an AI-shaped future.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, CIAN O'NEILL AND BERNARD THOMPSON

There was a time when the abacus was considered essential education in Japan. For generations of children, learning to move its beads with speed and precision was not only a practical skill, but also a reflection of what society valued: accuracy, discipline and calculation. As Japan industrialized and modernized, the classroom changed with the needs of the economy. The tools children used and the abilities parents wanted them to acquire evolved alongside the world they were preparing to enter.

Now, technology is at another precipice as digital tools and AI are overturning the status quo of both education and society at large. AI can now process, summarize and solve problems in seconds. Rote learning and the reproduction of standardized answers were the skills once associated with academic success, but are no longer enough on their own. As technology takes on more of the work of calculation and information processing, the role of education is being redefined again. This moment validates the philosophy YARUKI Switch Group has pursued for decades: education is more than passing exams. "We believe education should include not only academic skills, but also the qualities and capacities children need in order to



live well in the twenty-first century," President and CEO Naoshi Takahashi said. "That means not only study support, but also English communication, physical development, early childhood development qualities such as an understanding of truth, ethical awareness, emotional intelligence, and the power of collaborative creation." Through brands spanning English immersion, early childhood education, sports, programming and experiential learning, the group has built a model designed to support children across different stages of development and different dimensions of ability. The company's approach is aligned with the global movement away from education centered narrowly on knowledge acquisition and toward a holistic model that develops the whole child. Takahashi sees technology in the classroom not as something that should make students' lives easier. "If our objective is to help children build self-driven capacity and creativity, then AI cannot be introduced in a way that undermines struggle, concentration, or independent thinking. It has to be used in a way that deepens those processes rather than replacing them," he said.



Stability, Retention and a Proven Operating Model

When families believe an institution understands their child and can contribute to long-term growth, education becomes a recurring service with resilient demand. Takahashi explained that education has built-in advantages compared with many franchise sectors. "Unlike restaurants or retail businesses, educational institutions generally require relatively low initial capital investment and do not require inventory management or procurement systems," he said. "In addition, education is a membership-style business. Families typically pay monthly fees in advance, creating stable recurring revenue and predictable cash flow." The company's own record points to the strength of that model, with many directly operated schools being opened and few of them closed. Takahashi attributed this not only to the demand for education, but also to the systems behind the classrooms. "Across approximately 2,400 classrooms, we have developed extensive systems for teacher training, classroom management and operational support," he says.

The model also lends well to franchising which contrasts with independent entrepreneurship, where new operators must absorb the full risk of building a model themselves. "Creating a successful business model from the beginning requires enormous time, money and risk," he said. "Franchising reduces much of that uncertainty because the systems, operational know-how and educational methods have already been tested and refined."

As a result, YARUKI Switch Group's platform has demonstrated consistent scalability, having worked with more than 700 franchise owners. HALLO, its programming education business, is one example: according to Takahashi, it grew from its first school to more than 970 sites in five years. That ability to identify demand, package educational content and distribute it through an established network gives the company a route to growth that is difficult for smaller operators to replicate. The model also boasts high retention. In School IE, the company's individualized tutoring brand, internal research cited in the interview indicates that the average enrollment period is longer than that of other major operators. Families stay when they feel the school is looking beyond short-term academic results. Parents are not only seeking immediate improvement; they want an educational environment that contributes to their child's future over many years.

The group's wider philosophy is reflected in its long, ongoing relation-

"Our focus is on developing children's ability to think independently, communicate and build the capability to succeed in life. We believe those human skills are universal and applicable across cultures."

Naoshi Takahashi
President and CEO,
YARUKI Switch Group Co., Ltd.



through its model that is designed to understand each child's personality, motivation, habits and development over time. That broader view strengthens trust with families, deepens engagement and supports repeat enrollment across multiple stages of childhood.

One Philosophy, Many Pathways

YARUKI Switch Group's growth is built on a multi-brand strategy that allows the company to move beyond the conventional image of a cram school and present itself as a comprehensive child-development platform.

"Our youngest students begin at approximately one and a half years old, and we continue supporting students all the way through age 18," Takahashi said. "In order to support children throughout those many stages of growth, we need multiple educational formats and brands capable of addressing different developmental needs." Kids Duo International combines bilingual early childhood education with intellectual, physical and social development. Ninja Nine brings a research-informed approach to sports education, with methods grounded in biomechanics. HALLO develops logical thinking, creative execution and presentation skills through programming education. Each brand supports a different dimension of growth: language, movement, coding, creativity, motivation and self-expression. As Takahashi puts it, education must support the child "academically, socially, emotionally and personally."

Taking a Method, Rather Than Textbooks, Across Borders

Education has long been difficult to globalize because it is shaped by local curricula, entrance exams, regulations and parental expectations. A cram school model built narrowly around test preparation may work well in one country but lose relevance in another, where the academic system and measures of success are entirely different. The group's "YARUKI Method" is designed to draw out motivation while developing abilities that are widely valued across cultures: communication, confidence, creativity, independent thinking and adaptability. "Our focus is on developing our 'Three Essential Strengths'—the Power of Independence, the Power of Collaborative Creation, and the Power of Imagination—to build children's capability to succeed in life," he said.

That makes the model more transferable, while overseas experience has also sharpened its approach. Takahashi says YARUKI Switch Group has learned that "when expanding overseas, we should not fundamentally change the educational essence of the product itself. What needs to adapt are management methods, local operations, people management and marketing strategies in order to fit local cultures and conditions."

Takahashi identifies Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines as markets with young populations, rising middle classes and growing demand for English communication, international exposure, creativity and broader human development. YARUKI Switch Group already has proof that its model can gain local acceptance: it has operated in Taiwan since 2008 and now has more than 50 classrooms there, serving local families with local teachers. The next phase points to wider regional growth, including a hoped-for launch of the bilingual kindergarten Kids Duo International in Indonesia, further growth in Taiwan for Global Live English Conversation, sports classes for Kids Ninja Nine and the programming education program HALLO. The company's flagship brand, Kids Duo International, is an advanced kindergarten where children can experience the educational services owned by YARUKI Switch Group in a one-stop environment built on three pillars. Ninja Nine provides theory-based physical education for toddlers and elementary school students. Child Eyes draws on the expertise of its toddler classes; the program supports early intellectual development while helping prepare children for school entrance exams. English and English conversation education services, which encompass approximately 4,000 hours of English use over four years. YARUKI Switch Group's expansion is both a business opportunity and a contribution to education infrastructure in markets where demand is rising quickly.

Building Schools and Futures

For YARUKI Switch Group, overseas expansion is also a way to contribute to markets where the education infrastructure is still developing. "We believe the greatest opportunities exist in countries where educational infrastructure is still developing rather than in markets that are already fully mature," Takahashi said.

In many Southeast Asian markets, demand for quality education is rising faster than local private education systems can mature. Parents want stronger English, creativity and communication skills for their children. Local partners need tested operating systems, teacher training and educational know-how. Children need the confidence and adaptability to thrive in changing economies. YARUKI Switch Group's role is to connect those needs through a proven platform where commercial sustainability and social impact reinforce each other. Stronger schools create stronger communities, while trusted education creates durable demand. From the abacus to AI, education has always evolved with the tools of its time. YARUKI Switch Group's proposition is that children need more than technical fluency. They need confidence, creativity and motivation. By drawing out those human qualities, the company is preparing learners for whatever comes next.



Nihon University Builds Global Connections Through Japanese Education

Nihon University is strengthening global education by helping international students experience Japan's academic, cultural and professional opportunities. BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, BERNARD THOMPSON AND CIAN O'NEILL



The first day of a new semester at university can be nerve-wracking; there are new professors and peers to meet, a mountain of coursework to understand and a campus to get lost in. This is compounded for exchange students, far from home and often navigating in a different language. But the benefits of studying abroad far outweigh the challenges, and Nihon University is working to create an environment where international students who want to study in Japan can thrive.

President Shinichiro Ohnuki, Ph.D., said that internationalization is not simply about imitating what foreign schools do. Citing the critical success of “Shōgun” and YOASOBI’s Billboard chart-topping single “Idol,” both of which feature prominent alumni of the university, he sees culture as an appeal in itself. “True globalization means creating something of genuine value and

expressing it authentically, while still being able to connect with people around the world,” he said. “That, in many ways, is the value of studying in Japan.” While still offering English courses, Nihon University approaches international education as a cultural experience as well as an academic one.

“If students travel halfway around the world to study in Japan, I believe they should gain something that cannot be replicated elsewhere,” he said. Learning about Japan is part of that experience. “Nihon University wants to be the kind of institution that provides both international

accessibility and meaningful engagement with Japan.” The university is extending its reach beyond Japan’s shores through its partner institutions. It operates the Nihon University Newcastle Campus in Australia, supported by a strategic partnership with the University of Newcastle. “I believe this collaborative approach offers important opportunities for intercultural exchange and shared learning,” he said.

What sets Nihon University apart is its enormous network of over 1.3 million alumni. The university offers membership in a global community of academics, key researchers, artists and public leaders. “When prospective students ask about the value of studying at Nihon University, I often think about this network,” he said. “It provides connections, opportunities, mentorship, and a sense of belonging that extends far beyond graduation.”

Ohnuki said that as a comprehensive university encompassing almost all academic fields, it is often seen as a microcosm of Japan and faces many of the same challenges society does. As the population declines and demographics shift, he emphasizes the increasing importance of lifelong learning. As society ages, people will remain professionally active for longer. “To support these transitions, the university leverages its advanced educational digital transformation (DX) initiatives, providing flexible, high-quality learning environments that transcend geographical boundaries,” he added. Furthermore, universities can support local communities by providing opportunities for people to live and work outside metropolitan areas and contribute to regional revitalization.

“Nihon University wants to be the kind of institution that provides both international accessibility and meaningful engagement with Japan.”

Shinichiro Ohnuki, Ph. D.
President, Nihon University.



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