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Stop extortion by private universities

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The Consumer Contract Law was implemented in April last year. According to this law, consumers are not obliged to pay compensation for damage associated with the termination of a contract.

Based on this stipulation, a group of attorneys sent contents-certified mail to over 40 private universities and technical schools, demanding the return of tuition and admission charges for those who decided not to enter the universities.

Several private universities in the Kansai area, such as Kansai University of Foreign Studies and Kyoto Seika University, have agreed to return tuitions; however, 23 universities and five technical schools ignored the demands.

Finally, on June 28, 58 people sued these universities and technical schools for breaching the Consumer Contract Law, requesting financial compensation amounting to approximately 59 million yen.

In 1975, the Ministry of Education asked private universities not to collect tuition before the announcement of national universities' entrance exam results in March. The Association of Private Universities of Japan (APUJ), consisting of 324 private universities, explained that most private universities accept the 1975 notification.

APUJ, however, does not know how it will respond to those universities that do not accede to the request even if the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MECSST) strongly reiterated its position this past May.

It is unacceptable that private universities collect tuition from those who do not take classes. It is a pity that APUJ cannot police itself. Effective self-policing is critical for any such association; otherwise, serious outside intervention is required, especially from the MECSST.

In order to maintain autonomous development, APUJ executive members should demonstrate strong leadership to correct inappropriate behavior on the part of member universities.

Private universities may have their own financial reasons to collect tuition in advance, but, instead of "stealing" money from those who do not attend classes, those universities should pay much attention to upgrading their academic services for their students and ask appropriate fees for the services.

Recently, many private universities misunderstand what "service" really means. Many women's universities and community colleges spoil their students, especially seniors. Even if seniors get lower grades than the minimum required to pass a course, university executive officers put strong pressure on faculty members to pass them, arguing that dropouts may damage the university's reputation.

These officers believe that "educational consideration" is necessary. They make sure that every senior,

regardless of her achievement, will get a diploma, which they consider to be appropriate "academic service."

In other words, those women's universities and community colleges have become low-quality diploma factories. Academic service strictly means research and education. Universities, both private and public, should provide their faculty members with the best conditions in which to conduct research, in particular, enough time for research.

In return, these faculty members should be responsible for producing visible achievement within a reasonable amount of time, and should pass on the benefits to students. University faculty members should be qualitatively different from secondary and primary education teachers: They are primarily responsible for carrying out original research and presenting their findings to students.

Faculty members' originality is the essence of a university's assets. The more assets private universities possess, the more attractive they become. Consequently, universities should put more emphasis on increasing their assets rather than resorting to stopgap measures to meet short-term financial needs.

What private universities need now is a long-term strategy to make their assets more attractive, not short-term gimmicks to fool applicants.

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