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Serving Society under the New Normal: A Statement from National Universities

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On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Japan Association of National Universities (JANU), national universities express their resolve to serve society under an emerging set of new values.

National university roles and reforms

The most fundamental mission of national universities is to support local and national development, and play leading roles on the international stage. National universities in Japan have successfully produced leaders in different sectors of society—including many Nobel laureates—and have made solid contributions to the country's growth, to local development, and to the international community. In a knowledge-based society, university excellence directly translates to national power. **National universities are resolved to fully commit themselves to social development and building the future, based upon the understanding that university research is conducted to solve today's issues, and university education is conducted to build the capacity to shape tomorrow.** To better meet these goals, national universities have autonomously and proactively reformed themselves in areas ranging from international readiness to systemic aspects, accelerating such moves in close collaboration with industries and society at large. Moreover, **national universities have respected inclusivity in terms of gender and other diversity factors, which has enabled national universities to make progress in partnership with richly diverse stakeholders including the state, the local community, and businesses, not to mention students, faculty, and staff. The fruit of all this, it is hoped, is that national universities will be at the heart of efforts to realize a liberal and inclusive society open to fresh values.**

National universities as shapers of the new normal

The world is struggling under an unprecedented global-scale crisis in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to being a threat in itself, the spread of this infectious disease has magnified the world's many existing woes. In today's globalized world, problems are compounded by other problems to generate yet more problems often of greater complexity—such as the effects of population on food and water demand; economic competition and economic disparity; religious conflicts; energy demand and environmental pollution; and emerging human diseases associated with changes to the global environment. These problems not only directly affect personal well-being in the forms of hunger, disease, and poverty but also lead to international conflicts and organized terrorism. In addition to these, in Japan low fertility, aging, and rural decline are major problems affecting its future ahead of many other countries in the world.

Becoming better equipped for globalization and digital transformation is thought to be of urgent importance for addressing these issues. Furthermore, fundamental solutions require the full mobilization of human wisdom through efforts transcending barriers, boundaries, and differences, which in turn call for scientific and technological innovations; unbiased historical and geographical perceptions; and doctrinal and psychological perspectives rooted in philosophy, as well as the application of these in combination.

Those of us who gain firsthand experience of what digital transformation can achieve under the COVID-19 pandemic have the **responsibility to feed the experience back into the process of shaping the “new normal” based on fresh ideas and their execution. National universities in Japan understand that they are tasked with steering this.**

Accelerating digital transformation for green recovery and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

The “new normal” would obviously entail new lifestyles and communication modes, which do not necessarily solve the aforementioned problems. But this does not mean that humans are just watching helplessly. Goals and policies for the entire global community to commit to have already been laid out, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and “green recovery,” the latter being a watchword for post-pandemic rehabilitation. Japan places the Society 5.0 concept at the center of its policies for addressing social challenges. Society 5.0 envisages a future society where advances in digital transformation enable data to be employed in the service of people and society, and close integration of cyber and physical spaces drives human activities and solutions to social issues. Japan faces various problems resulting from low fertility and aging. It goes without saying that fundamental measures for addressing low fertility currently in place (such as subsidized infertility treatment and provision of better access to child care) remain very important. The country’s future can be additionally supported by innovative technological developments based on digital transformation that are capable of supplementing labor shortages and providing assistance in everyday life in an aging society. Japan also needs to address rural decline through revitalization, rehabilitation, and innovative community building. The COVID-19 pandemic has driven home the vulnerability of the heavy concentration of population, business, and politics in the capital city of Tokyo. For the country to be more resilient going forward, it is worth considering a shift to a society less dependent on Tokyo, with more social functions shared by other locations, which in turn would directly lead to their revitalization. The era of digital transformation comes at an opportune time for making such a shift feasible.

National universities support the SDGs principles and the realization of Society 5.0. Indeed, **national universities—located in prefectures across the country to form a nationwide academic information network—are positioned as part of the core infrastructure of Japanese society, which is fast becoming data-driven. National universities look forward to leveraging digital technology to strengthen university functions; to providing high-quality education; to steering digital transformation; to supporting the realization of the SDGs and green recovery; and to fostering talent capable of contributing to the solution of global issues as well as rural and regional growth.** National universities look forward to offering greater student support for providing equal opportunity and lifelong learning to all students. National universities will also make their hospitals better able to serve communities through the training of medical and health care workers.

Driving collaborations for future-looking innovations

Research conducted by national universities pursues and explores truths and principles in order to serve contemporary society through the findings made. Studies range from basic and applied research to development research, implementation research, and field testing, invariably rooted in the elucidation of events taking place in the 13.8 billion years between the creation of the universe, matter, life, and humans to the development of society and civilizations. **National universities understand that the education and research they conduct make them centers of cultural, social, and**

economic support for the country and its regions, playing highly responsible roles in local and regional industry, health care, welfare, and education. Under the “new normal” of living with COVID-19, it is important to seek solutions tapping the merits of both the cyber and the physical. Propelled by exponential advancements in digital transformation, industries are increasingly shifting toward the provision of intangible goods. We are also living in a world of VUCA—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity—a state of flux where the future is no longer an easily predictable, linear extension of the present, meaning we need to work cooperatively across all barriers to meet diverse and complex challenges. Such collaborations need to be based on shared principles and beliefs, for instance in science and technology as serving human rights as well as personal and social happiness; the inviolability of academic freedom; and greater scientific openness and transparency. Guided by these ideas, **national universities will drive collaborations involving multiple academic disciplines, and between universities, industries, and the public sector.** Specific areas calling for such collaborations may include the following:

- Digital science research based on data science and artificial intelligence: Including the areas of cyber security and quantum computer development. Multidisciplinary collaboration—humanities and social science input is fast becoming essential—is increasingly active in this area of science and tech research, which provides the basis for many other areas.
- Carbon neutral and green recovery research for mitigating climate change and global warming: Including the areas of energy production and efficiency, material science, and nuclear fusion.
- Research into human well-being (physical, emotional, and social): Including research covering food and water issues; control of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases; control of cancer and cerebrovascular diseases; and measures for low fertility and aging. Research serving human well-being is gaining in importance.
- Research into social changes and reassessment of democracy: Important research topics include rules for the application of information and communications technology to society; and geopolitical topics to do with the integrity of democracy, such as populism and despotism.

For a better society

The spread of COVID-19 has impacted society in countless ways. Along with wars, revolutions, and state failures, pandemics are counted as one of the great levelers by Walter Scheidel in his book *The Great Leveler*, which argues that catastrophic events causing the redistribution of power and wealth, as well as the collapse of rule, have led to the achievement of greater equality throughout human history. Intriguingly however, the present pandemic seems, if anything, to highlight division or disparity—arguably a fundamental global issue for science, technology, the arts, and human wisdom to overcome in the world of the “new normal.” The Japan Association of National Universities believes the country’s **national universities should be at the center of efforts to solve disparity**, and appreciates the ongoing generous support and understanding from the general public for them.