

# Kyoto: A Heartland of Culture and Learning



The First Graduating Class (July 1900)

Kyoto University was established in June 1897 as the second national university in Japan. One reason for the founding of a new university was the increasing number of students who hoped to matriculate at the University of Tokyo, the only imperial university at that time. Another was the need to foster talented leaders urgently needed by the rapidly developing industrial nation. In addition to those national concerns, there was considerable impetus from a local movement in Kyoto, which had been calling for the founding of a second university for several years.

Kyoto was the capital of Japan from 794 to 1868. At the time of its establishment as capital by the Emperor Kammu, the city was called Heian-kyo (平安京), the Japanese characters for which literally mean “a peaceful and tranquil capital.” Kyoto experienced various political changes during its long period as capital, and was also home to many famous scholars. In addition, a large number of temples and shrines were established, which are now recognized as important cultural heritage sites. This rich blend of politics, religion, and academia led to the city evolving as the nation’s center of learning and culture.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the capital was transferred to Edo, soon to be renamed Tokyo. The sudden change caused the population of Kyoto to drop dramatically,



The university main gate and the main building of the college of science and engineering



and the city entered a state of depression. But Kyoto would soon flourish again, this time not as a political center, but as a cultural, educational, and economic center with an innovative and rapidly developing industrial sector. Kyoto was the location of Japan's first elementary and junior high schools, its first kindergarten, and first public library. It was also where the first hydroelectric power plant and tram system were developed, and the location of Japan's first industrial exposition.

Kyoto University is a national university with its own unique traditions. At the university's official opening, the first president, Hiroji Kinoshita, delivered a speech emphasizing that it must have a unique character, declaring that "this university is neither a branch nor a small-scale model of its forerunner, the Imperial University of Tokyo." Since those early days, academic freedom and an educational system centered on student autonomy have been the chief characteristics of Kyoto University.



The Clock Tower shortly after construction

Kyoto University was the first university in Japan to introduce a seminar system stressing the mutual cultivation of both students and instructors, and the first to require a thesis for graduation. The university also offered a wide choice

of classes that students were allowed to select freely in order to foster their own initiative and creativity. One of the university's first ever graduates, who later became a professor of the Faculty of Law, recalled that, in regard to the educational system, "the idea was to create a free and lively academic environment. The system gave students the right to choose electives, and sought to make them feel confident in their choices while also encouraging them to take personal responsibility for them."



Mustache Party: A band of mustachioed students posing as larger-than-life character

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**WEB** [kua1.archives.kyoto-u.ac.jp/ja/english.html](http://kua1.archives.kyoto-u.ac.jp/ja/english.html)



## Kyoto University Archives and Historical Exhibition

Kyoto University Archives was established in 2000 to acquire and preserve archival materials (i.e. non-current documentary records) relating to Kyoto University, such as documents written by former presidents and professors, and make them available for research, reference, and administrative purposes. Based on those materials, it also functions as an institution for research into archival science, the history of the university, and higher education in Japan.

The Archives also operates a permanent exhibition on the history of Kyoto University in the Historical Exhibition Room of the Clock Tower Centennial Hall. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a model of the Main Campus in 1939, which is surrounded by documents and pictures arranged into eight themes: from the "Foundation of the University" to "Kyoto University in Recent Years." The exhibition also features video booths and a reconstruction of a pre-war student boarding house room. The exhibition aims to inspire visitors to think about the past, present, and future of Kyoto University.



Historical Exhibition Room in the Clock Tower Centennial Hall

(Author: Prof. Shin Nishiyama)