

Chapter 10

Stability amidst a storm of evaluation: policy trends and practice in higher education evaluation in Japan

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Introduction

Japanese universities are amidst a storm of various types of evaluation and quality assessment. As is the case throughout Europe, the Japanese higher education system is faced with continuous pressure to reform in order to meet increasing societal expectations for universities and colleges to contribute directly to society.

Japan has developed a large and diversified higher education system alongside a large private sector. In 2006, Japan had 744 four-year universities, most offering postgraduate programmes, and 468 junior colleges, 64 colleges of technology and 2996 specialized training colleges issuing associate degrees or diplomas. The selectivity of the students among HEIs (higher education institutions) is highly diverse. Some of the research-intensive prestigious universities are attracting highly talented students, while around 40% of the less-prestigious private universities are facing difficulty in attracting sufficient numbers of students to ensure their continued survival.

This oversupply of higher education is still a relatively recent phenomenon, having started around 2000. A rapid decrease in the youth population after the second baby boomer generation finished their higher education in the first half of the 1990s, and a continuous increase in higher education supply based on deregulation policies for the establishment of new programmes are the main factors of this

new transition from historical overdemand in the higher education market to the current oversupply condition. In recent years, more than ten new four-year universities have been opening their doors each year, while some universities are facing bankruptcy. It is now clear that the government has abandoned any idea as to how to control student numbers in the Japanese higher education system. On the other hand, the government has also begun to rely heavily on a new indirect control mechanism, namely 'quality assurance' or 'evaluation'.

The introduction of corporate-style management to the national university system in 2004 includes the assessment of six-year cycle medium-term goals and plans, the achievement of which is closely linked with financial allocation. Assessment is not only implemented as an audit of institutional management, but also considers performance in education and research. National universities now submit annual reports to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) evaluation committee, the assessments of which are made publicly accessible. Adding to this national university evaluation scheme, all national, local, public and private universities and colleges have to go through a seven-year cycle of 'certified evaluation', which could be regarded as accreditation. Many project-based funding schemes for excellence in research and teaching have also been introduced, with universities competing for the number of incentive fund projects they can attract [1].

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Quality assurance and evaluation in Japanese higher education is becoming increasingly complicated. The increase in the number and type of assessment and evaluation programmes incurs considerable costs for the preparation and submission of documents. The question is raised: do these quality assessment and evaluation tools lead to any real change in Japanese higher education?

This chapter analyses policy trends and practice in higher education evaluation, focusing on the difficulty inherent in stimulating effective quality improvement through a quality assessment system initiated by a state government. First, I outline the different types of quality assessment and evaluation mechanisms now implemented in Japanese higher education. Secondly, the impact of these rather fragmented and overlapping evaluation mechanisms is discussed, focusing on management, governance and practice in higher education, and more generally on social perspectives of the status quo. Finally, I argue that, while evaluation and quality assurance systems are relatively easily developed and espoused by the Ministry, the actual impact of these various exercises on the existing hierarchical structure of Japanese universities is more difficult to identify.

Historical development of evaluation in Japanese higher education

Introduction of self-monitoring and self-evaluation

The practice of accreditation in Japanese higher education is not altogether new. Under the U.S. occupation, Japan established a new university system by creating four-year undergraduate and American-compatible two-year masters and three-year doctorate programmes. Changes at this time also included the integration of rather European-compatible 'imperial' and other universities and polytechnics in 1949. The Ministry of Education (then *Monbusho*) had already maintained an authorized process of establishing pre-war universities, especially with regard to private ones. Under the idea of 'university autonomy', the U.S. occupation government supported the practice of voluntary assessment by the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA), and University Standards were

utilized for authorizing new universities. After Japan regained her independence in 1950, the Ministry of Education set-up its own Standards for University Establishment, upon which JUAA's accreditation process became a completely non-governmental voluntary activity [2].

In the late 1980s, a new type of debate concerning university evaluation started. The model generally referred to at that time was that of the American system rather than the newly starting European quality assessment systems. At the time, the existing governmental authorization system was regarded as a type of British 'chartering', with the American-type regular-based accreditation system referred to as a preferable future model for the Japanese university evaluation system. Up to then, the JUAA had not implemented any cyclical accreditation process; once a university became an accredited member, it was able to hold member status without time limitations. Only around one-third of Japanese universities had been accredited, mainly because there was no effective sanction for non-accredited universities [3].

In 1991, the University Council, an advisory council of the Ministry of Education recommended that universities "make efforts towards self-evaluation and monitoring" The model of this self-monitoring and evaluation process would be the self-study of the American accreditation process. The University Council also argued that Japan should develop an American-style accreditation system in the future, with JUAA regarded as the organization best suited to take the lead role.

The University Council also recommended the drastic deregulation of the Standards for University Establishment to allow university education programmes to adapt to changing social needs in a more flexible and meaningful way. At the same time, the government loosened national controls of student numbers which had been implemented under various higher education plans since the mid 1970s.

In the 1990s, university evaluation initiatives became active. By 2000, 92% of universities had implemented some type of self-monitoring and evaluation, and 83% of national universities and 24% of private universities had also implemented 'external evaluation' by organizing 'external review committees' under their own initiative [4]. JUAA also became

more active, issuing manuals for self-monitoring and evaluation, implementing 'mutual evaluation' as a kind of external evaluation and also acting as a body to re-accredit existing member institutions [5,6].

'Third-party' evaluation and the establishment of a national evaluation organization

The direction of the evaluation debate in Japan changed drastically in the late 1990s. As part of the administrative reforms in general, arguments for the privatization or incorporation of national universities became stronger from the Ministry of Finance and other supporters of the privatization of public services. Initially, the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (the newly restructured *Monbukagakusho*)², as well as JANU (Japan Association for National Universities) was opposed to the idea of the privatization and incorporation of national universities. Arguing that incorporation was not necessary for national university reform, the Ministry of Education started to examine the possibility of strengthening the external assessment system of higher education in order to demonstrate accountability and performance. At the same time, some leading academics supported the idea of concentrating public research funds among top universities so that they can survive global academic competition.

In 1996, JANU sent a delegation to the U.K. to study ongoing external quality assessment in that country [7]. Following this visit, British and Continental European trends in quality assessment of education and research became frequently referred to in discussions of higher education policy. In 1998, the University Council issued a report recommending the introduction of 'third-party' evaluation for quality improvement and accountability of universities and colleges [8]. The Council report mentioned neither the incorporation nor the privatization of national universities, but did recommend the establishment of a national university evaluation organization, arguing that the results of third-party evaluation should be used as a determining factor in financial allocation. The 'third-party' evaluation debate was not limited

to within the higher education system, but was also ongoing in public services in general at that time.

Acceleration of 'higher education' reform

2000–2004

In 2000, the newly created NIAD-UE (National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation), comprising approximately 100 academic and non-academic staff recruited mainly from national university staffs and faculties, commenced university evaluation activities. NIAD-UE implemented three types of pilot evaluation programmes as follows:

1. Evaluation of research activities. The Ministry of Education nominated a limited number of collaborative faculties from national and local public universities in ten broad academic fields. Evaluation results were published, with ratings and recommendations for the improvement of research activities and management as informed by respective institutional missions, including the examination of academic standards as reflected in individual academic staff profiles (stated in terms of rankings ranging from excellent through good and ordinary to unsatisfactory).
2. Evaluation of educational activities. The Ministry of Education nominated a limited number of collaborative samples from national and local public universities in ten broad academic fields. Evaluation results were published, with ratings and recommendations for improvement of education activities and management as informed by respective institutional missions.
3. Thematic evaluation. Implemented for all national and selected local public universities on selected topics such as social contribution, international linkage and general education.

Under accelerated administrative reforms of the Koizumi Cabinet, the then Minister of Education Atsuko Toyama proposed further university reforms

²The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (*Monbusho*) was integrated with the Science and Technology Agency (STA) in 2001, changing its name to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*, or MEXT).

which included a plan to foster the development of 30 'top' or 'world-class' research universities. This proposed official selection of 30 universities and the associated concentration of financial resources sparked heated debate over the future direction of Japanese higher education. Smaller-sized and rurally located national universities were especially opposed to this idea on the grounds that they support the basic infrastructure of Japanese research activities. A compromise was eventually reached in the 21st Century Centre of Excellence (COE) Program, which re-conceptualized reforms as aiming to foster the development of top 'research units', as opposed to top institutions.

The 21st Century COE Program was utilized as a funding scheme to offer an incentive for excellent research units, and top national, local, public and private universities to compete for 'COE21 units', which are recognized as good indicators of domestic academic status. Funding comes from MEXT, with selection carried out by the JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science). Each COE21 research unit represents 5 years of funding and can lead to the employment of full-time researchers for projects. The results of selections to date have been surprisingly consistent with the traditional public image ranking of top universities. Namely, the University of Tokyo and other former imperial universities, the Tokyo Institute of Technology (the top national engineering university), and Keio and Waseda (top private universities) consistently appear among the top ten rankings [9].

The COE21 scheme, however, was positively received, at least by the leading universities which benefited from this incentive fund. Following the COE21 scheme, MEXT started similar funding incentive schemes for educational activities, such as the 'Support Program for Distinctive University Education (Good Practice in Education)'. This incentive fund is provided by MEXT, with selection and monitoring implemented by the JUAA. Funding for this initiative is considerably less than that provided under the COE21 scheme, and each institution can submit only one project for consideration. However, this incentive fund offers opportunities to more teaching-oriented universities and colleges, which can use the award to fund advertising

and student marketing.

In 1999, the Cabinet had decided to incorporate all national universities within five years, to provide them with greater autonomy. MEXT organized a special taskforce with JANU to be responsible for the system design to guide incorporation plans. Here, the performance assessment scheme for national universities became a core issue, leading to the establishment of the National University Corporation Evaluation Committee (NUCEC) within MEXT.

Around this time, discussions on quality assurance in transnational higher education also came to the fore, influenced by the rapid development of the international student market in East Asia. Japan became actively involved in international quality assurance debates in the WTO (World Trade Organization), OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), as a country with a higher education system capable of both sending and receiving large numbers of students [10]. Furthermore, this debate served to stimulate policy discussion on the national quality assurance system of university education, and, in 2004, the Japanese government introduced the 'certified evaluation' system, which can be understood as an accreditation system legally required by School Education Law amendment.

The Koizumi Cabinet's administrative reforms affect higher education policy in additional ways. Decentralization policies led to the establishment of the Special District for Administrative Reform as a pilot project of deregulation under which municipal governments can apply to earmark special districts for specific deregulation. For examples, Osaka city and the Chiyoda district of Tokyo applied for and received approval to deregulate for-profit universities operated by stock companies. This process also included the drastic deregulation of campus property; whereas in the past universities basically had to own their campus facilities, legal amendments now allow the borrowing of campus facilities for both non-profit, private universities and colleges.

The quality assurance debate for cross-border education services also led to the establishment of an official designation system for Japanese branches of foreign universities. Although, in practice, some

American university branches in Japan had already started operation by the end of the 1980s, their existence was not yet officially recognized by MEXT. The aim of this designation is to protect students by providing a system of official recognition of quality providers of education.

Further change in evaluation since 2004

In 2004, all national universities, junior colleges and colleges of technology in Japan were incorporated. National universities are now operated as newly established NUCs (national university corporations). The Ministry of Education sets medium-term goals for each NUC, upon which each institution bases medium-term plans. NUCEC assesses the achievement of those medium-term goals and plans every 6 years; similarly, NIAD-UE evaluates education and research activities and reports to NUCEC every 6 years. National universities and colleges are requested to publish annual reports, which are evaluated by NUCEC annually.

The Certified Evaluation (accreditation) scheme, as discussed above, has also recently come into being, under which MEXT, in consultation with the Central Council for Education, certifies evaluation organizations which implement certified evaluation programmes.

There are two types of certified evaluation, as follows.

1. Institutional level certified evaluation. Compulsory for all national, local, public and private universities, junior colleges and colleges of technology, which must undergo these programmes every 7 years. MEXT, in consultation with the Central Council for Education, certifies 'certified evaluation organizations' according to guidelines requiring the publication of evaluation standards, processes and results. As for authority to designate 'certified evaluation organizations', JUAA, NIAD-UE and the newly established Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation (JIHEE) applied for and received this power from the Ministry. Universities, junior colleges and colleges of technology are free to choose the certified evaluation authority to which they apply. In theory, while HEIs are required to

apply for certified evaluation, MEXT does not have direct legal authority to close institutions that do not receive favourable results.

2. Certified evaluation for professional graduate schools (programme level). The professional graduate school system (such as law schools and business schools) started in 2004, as separate from existing, rather academic-oriented post-graduate programmes. For these professional graduate schools, certified evaluation is required within every 5 years. MEXT, in consultation with the Central Council for Education, designates 'certified evaluation organizations' according to published guidelines. Professional schools may select the certifying evaluation authority to which they apply. In theory, while professional schools are required to apply for certified evaluation, MEXT does not have direct legal authority to close those institutions that do not receive favourable results.

In addition to these certified evaluation schemes, universities and colleges are faced with several other types of evaluation. Only 1 year after the deregulation of authorization procedures for new university programmes in 2004, MEXT started to re-examine the idea of shifting from *ex ante* (before establishment) to *ex post* (after establishment) evaluation, which had been decided upon 1 year earlier. The 2005 Central Council for Education report stressed the importance of both *ex ante* Governmental Authorization and *ex post* certified evaluation [11]. Although the authorization process itself was deregulated, MEXT started an 'after care' scheme of governmental authorization; after starting the programmes, site visits by the University Establishment Assessment Committee were implemented, and the results posted on the governmental website.

From 2004, MEXT also strengthened its ability to influence poorly performing universities and colleges; it can now issue recommendations and advice to national, local, public and private universities and colleges in addition to using the existing 'order for closure' power, which has not been used thus far. In addition to this, COE21 projects have to go through the interim and *ex post* evaluation, with

results published to reveal achievement ratings. The number of 'good practice' projects is also increasing, and, together with the existing 'Support Program for Distinctive University Education,' the government has also started the 'Support Program for Contemporary Educational Needs,' the 'University Education Internationalization Promotion Program,' the 'Support Program for Professional Graduate School Formation' and the 'Program to Support Medical Education Corresponding to Community Health Care and Other Social Needs,' as shown below. These rapidly increasing incentive budgeting programmes are basically welcomed by the institutions, while the cost to submit proposals is obviously increasing.

1. Support Program for Distinctive University Education (2003–present). This programme supports the efforts of universities to achieve distinctive and outstanding education, and provides information to greater society by holding forums, publishing collections of case studies, etc. (Projects: FY2003: 80; FY2004: 58)
2. Initiatives for Attractive Post-Graduate Education (from 2006). This programme intensively supports highly motivated and distinctive postgraduate education in order to strengthen the fostering of creative young researchers who can meet contemporary social needs (Project: FY2006: 46).
3. Support Program for Contemporary Education Needs (2004–present). This programme supports the outstanding efforts of universities and other institutions to respond to recommendations of various councils and policies reflecting strong social demands (Project: FY2004: 86).
4. University Education Internationalization Promotion Program (2005–present). This programme supports efforts to further internationalize university education through overseas student and staff dispatches, active co-operation with overseas universities, etc.
5. Support Program for Professional Graduate School Formation (2004–present). This programme supports efforts to develop and enhance educational content and methods in graduate law schools and other professional graduate schools (Project: FY2004: 63).
6. Support Program for High Quality Teacher Training (2006–present). This programme supports efforts to strengthen university teacher-training programmes and ongoing education of school teachers, in order to improve the quality of teacher-training programmes in universities.
7. Program to Support Medical Education Corresponding to Community Health Care and Other Social Needs (2005–present). This programme supports efforts by university hospitals to cultivate medical professionals who will be responsible for holistic medical care, by developing medical education based on community health care and other social needs.
8. The 21st Century COE Program (2002–present). This programme supports the formation of global research and education centres by introducing the principle of competition through third-party evaluation (Projects: FY2002: 113 projects at 50 universities; FY2003: 133 projects at 56 universities; FY2004: 28 projects at 24 universities).

Adding to these incentive programmes, in 2005 the Central Council for Education issued a report focusing on improving the international attractiveness of postgraduate education in Japan [12]. The report recommends subject-level-certified evaluation of postgraduate programmes, along with existing institutional-certified evaluation and professional school evaluation.

Discussions on the precise implementation of medium-term goal evaluation and plans for national university corporations are ongoing. How, and to what extent, NIAD-UE implements the evaluation of education and research activities of national universities will be particularly key factors in determining the future of university evaluation in Japanese higher education.

General discussion

Increasing evaluation costs with dubious results

Considering the rapid increase of evaluation-related programmes, it is clear that documentation work, monitoring and related evaluation tasks by

both the evaluation organizations and HEIs has drastically increased, and will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. Although it may be too early to assess the impact of this ongoing rapid development of university evaluation, concrete gains to justify the increasing costs of evaluation work are not readily apparent from the viewpoint of universities and colleges.

First of all, medium-term plans and goals do not suffice as institutional 'strategic plans' for HEIs. Considering the very complex nature of university management, medium-term goals and plans as applied to the 'Independent Administrative Corporation' scheme for public service agencies in general do not suit the inherently entrepreneurial nature of corporate-oriented strategic planning within HEIs. Some university managers point out the need to develop strategic plans and plans for effective university management separate from medium-term goals. Secondly, linkage of performance with financial allocation puts pressure on universities to avoid stating clear numerical goals for implementation. Thirdly, universities and colleges may have to make efforts for quality improvement, although actual implementation plans for the evaluation of research and education have not yet been fully decided. Annual budgeting still continues, even after incorporation, even though the linkage between evaluation results and budgeting remains unclear.

Although still in the early stages, problems regarding the implementation of various types of evaluation scheme are becoming apparent. First, it is very difficult to identify the victims of certified evaluation. All of the certified evaluation programmes of various certified evaluation organizations issue evaluation results with threshold decisions, namely 'pass', 'withhold' or 'fail'. In practice, however, it is very difficult to draw such clear-cut borderlines between qualified institutions or programmes and those which are unqualified. In the first annual results published by JUAA in March 2005, only 2 out of 34 universities were 'withheld', with the remaining 32 universities passing the certified evaluation. In the second year, NIAD-UE published their first results in March 2006, with all 23 national and local public universities and colleges which applied for evaluation meeting the required standards. All

universities and colleges which applied to the JUAA and JIHEE also passed.

Secondly, the impact of evaluation practices on existing images of university rankings, based mainly on student selectivity, has been relatively small. As for research activities, the top ten universities which gained the largest number of COE21 research units were dominated by the seven former 'imperial' universities, including the Tokyo Institute of Technology, and Keio and Waseda Universities. This result is exactly the same as the existing image of hierarchy among Japanese universities. Incentive fund schemes for educational activities may have some impact by highlighting particularly effective practices, some of which were not well known. The fact that these institutions received incentive funds was and is nevertheless utilized for promotional purposes.

Stability amidst a storm of evaluation and power plays

One of the reasons for the stability of ranking order despite the introduction and implementation of a variety of new assessment and evaluation systems could be the highly domestic nature of any evaluation process. Although most of the quality assessment and evaluation programmes advocate 'global standards' or 'international viability' as slogans, all of the evaluation schemes mentioned in this chapter are implemented only in Japan, in the Japanese language. While some non-Japanese committee members are frequently involved, all of those involved speak the Japanese language and are highly committed to Japanese higher education. Furthermore, evaluators and committee members tend to come from current and retired senior managers and academic leaders. These otherwise successful reviewers tend to have high confidence in the 'past successes' of Japanese society, and therefore have a tendency to defend the status quo, albeit perhaps unwittingly. Even experts in the international higher education arena seem to experience great difficulty in comprehending precisely what is going on in the Asia Pacific academic order. For example, there is a considerable gap in the rank positions of Chinese universities between the *Times Higher Education Supplement* World University Rankings and Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Ranking. As a country located in the Asia Pacific region, Japanese higher education stakeholders have to seek their positions in comparison with Western and Asian Pacific universities. However, the internationalization process of Japanese university evaluation practices is far behind its counterparts in Europe, the Asia Pacific and North America.

In terms of research performance assessment, the usage of performance indicators such as number of publications and citations may help to maintain a meaningful international comparison in some academic fields. MEXT initially made great efforts to collect such 'objective' performance data during the COE21 selection process, but these indicators were utilized only as factors for reference, with the peer-review process (among those who speak the Japanese language) ultimately utilized as the decisive method of selection.

The tools for grasping the international position of Japanese higher education are still very undecided, and the language barrier of academic activities also tends to limit the discussion of 'global standards' to a mere slogan. At the same time, however, some HEIs are beginning to gain 'international' accreditation from American accreditation bodies. Considering the relatively small size and rather hierarchical structure of the predominantly Japanese-speaking academic community, it is difficult to reject criticism that selections were influenced by traditional domestic power plays.

Old boys' club to meritocracy?

The evaluation storm is brewing not only at the system level, but also at the institutional level; it is certainly changing the academic culture in Japan, especially among the younger generation. In particular, the difference in the academic lives of the first baby boomer generation (around 60 years old) and that of the second baby boomer generation (around 30 years old) is significant.

First, the globalization of the academic market is having a great impact on academic culture. Traditionally, a limited number of leading postgraduate schools dominated the production of new academics, and inbreeding and nepotism were frequently seen in the Japanese academic labour market. Systematized doctoral programmes and the

rapid increase of self-financed overseas postgraduate students, however, are leading to the establishment of more equal relationships between established and newly entering academics.

Secondly, mobility and competition among researchers is increasing rapidly. While Japanese universities have a long tradition of tenured faculty, even among junior positions, these junior positions have been gradually replaced by short-term contract positions since the end of the 1990s [13].

Thirdly, increasing transparency in assessment, recruiting and application for competitive funding is improving opportunities for those institutions that demonstrate effort and improvement, and therefore merit. As information regarding academic performance and student satisfaction becomes more transparent, nepotism will become more difficult to cloak.

Lastly, the increasing power of university president offices coincides with the decreasing power of 'chair' professors; the organizational structure of most faculties and departments has thus become more flat. Academic performance and performance assessment in teaching, such as are reflected in student satisfaction surveys, enables able young researchers to escape from seniority customs to some extent.

End of *honenuki* (boning)? The danger of perfectionism in evaluation practice

The present public management and 'evaluation storm' has undeniably changed the style of 'collegial' dialogue in Japanese higher education. Dialogue within academia is becoming more transparent, clear and assertive. Japanese society in general, including its universities, has long been suffering from a tradition of *honenuki* culture. *Honenuki*, meaning the 'boning of fish' in Japanese, can be equated to the 'removal of teeth' in English; both expressions basically connote the weakening of power or influence; in this case, *honenuki* explains that the real impact of any reform may be subject to the desire of existing powers to protect their positions by taking out the core part of the reform to prolong the current regime. However, this *honenuki* custom is now faced with strong criticism under the rather fundamentalist ideology

of new public management. The evaluation process is apparently evolving as a thorough system. For example, under the certified evaluation scheme, university self-evaluation reports are posted on institution websites, with the evaluation process highly transparent, including both the objections of institutions and responses from evaluation committees.

Efforts to eliminate *honenuki*, if not carefully managed, may result in a kind of perfectionism, whether it is real or only perceived, which is equally undesirable. An overly detailed and mercilessly critical approach to evaluation would only represent an affront to sensitive academic activities. Perfectionism could therefore be regarded as a potentially dangerous attitude in evaluation arguments. Recognizing the risk of confusion, most evaluation organizations are now starting to stress that evaluation is a means and not an end. The 'improvement' function of university evaluation is now being stressed, probably because the goals of the entire exercise are at risk of being misunderstood, and hence resented. The end of *honenuki*, and the beginning of more rigorous transparency and assertiveness in the context of the university evaluation storm, is exactly what the provocateurs of university evaluation and new public management intended. At the same time, if not properly managed, the end of *honenuki* may leave the Japanese academic community lost in a storm of excessive evaluation, with little to show for their efforts.

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