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## OVERVIEW ANALYSIS ON ESTABLISHING QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: (CASE STUDY JAPAN)

**Abstract:** the definite form universities in Japan ought to take in dealing with the realities of the XXI century is the subject of immense interest; the new form should be designed by the desire to be contemporary, forward-thinking and society-relevant. Universities of the XXI century must be prepared and able to deal effectively with three basic outlooks confronting them: coping with new conditions and challenges; quality assurance and assessment mechanisms; implementation and contribution to national economic development.

**Keywords:** high education, implementing and sustaining change, innovative thinking, the quality approach, quality control, assessment, educational setting, the work philosophy transform, the traditional role

### 1. Introduction

There can be no one working in Higher Education (HE) today who is not aware in some measure that tremendous changes are taking places in the forms and structures of higher education. In the last two or three years, changes have occurred of a magnitude never previously experienced. Yet most people share in only a part of the action and it may be difficult to comprehend the whole diverse yet increasingly coherent picture.

It is quite clear that there has been a major shift in HE from being delivered by individual institutions, which exist in separation from one another to their being perceived as a national system perhaps with regional identities. Already Further Education (FE) is in the process of absorption into HE so that all post-sixteen education will fall under the same banner, even if there remain different funding bodies and mechanisms. It is more probable that there will be amalgamation of the government departments dealing with employment training and education (Employment Department and Department for Education).

Higher education institutes are engaged in the "pursuit of excellence"; and for most the term "excellence" is the synonymous with "quality". The total quality movement has rapidly developed due to the "obvious success" of the quality approaches in Japan: *to develop a powerful quality ethos requires not only culture change but also staff development to appropriate levels of education and training* [8]. The success of quality movement has become the driving force for similar developments within the academic world, but not without redesign to this very different area. The opportunity now being given to higher education is to learn from what has been achieved within the industrial setting and to develop it into an approach that reflects the vision and values of higher education.

### 2. Managing changes: coping with new conditions and challenges

Changing and adapting are two essential requirements for survival and growth. University generally operate with no great sense of urgency by their nature, are more conservative and protective. Though, many academics respond to change with anxiety because it involves redefining value and transforming the "universities' academic culture" [8]. Universities today are confronting daunting new challenges as they enter the early years of the XXI century; they are forced to grapple with these pervasive changes in order to meet the demands of the time: the relevance of their study programs to social needs, their role in social, economic and political activities, etc.

The real challenge of the "New Age" University is to remain contemporary and competent; it must preserve what is the most valuable in its tradition, while at the same time introducing the changes required by a dynamic society entering XXI century. Meaningful and significant changes must involve innovation, which is the purposeful action taken to accomplish something new. To achieve this, universities must create environments that encourage innovative thinking and risk taking. Changes involve careful planning and should not be left to chance. A successful change can only last to benefit the university and the academia if it is supported by proven strategies for implementing and sustaining change. Managing changes is thus going to be a subject of immense importance in the XXI century.

### 3. Dimensions of Quality

Quality assurance is concerned with providing evidence for interested people both within and outside an institution that the institution has in place procedures for ensuring that there is a commitment to improving quality. To establish these procedures it is necessary first of all to have some measure of quality i.e. quality assessment. "Quality" encompasses a number of concepts [11]:

- *Quality assurance* is concerned with ensuring that the structures, systems and approaches to teaching, research and administration allow the stated aims and objectives of the institutions to be met, and to ensure that procedures are in places to monitor and evaluate them.

- *Quality control* is the operational function by which every member of the university ensures that their contribution to meeting the aims and objectives of the institutions is rigorously undertaken.

- *Quality assessment* involves the monitoring of process and outcomes against agreed criteria; might be quantitative or qualitative in nature. Quality assessment forms the basis of a quality control system which itself supports the institution's policy of quality assurance. The challenge is to transfer this into a system which is both feasible and effective, and which takes into account of the unique nature of their "educational product".

One of the more widely accepted definitions of quality is "Quality equals fitness for purpose" then it follows that a prerequisite of quality assurance is the clear identification of the purpose to which the institution is striving. As each institution is unique, it must devise its own approach to quality assurance in the form of an overall strategy based upon its declared purpose. This strategy can be constructed into actions be each of the academic and administrative departments. The purpose of each institution must be well defined within the mission statement, but in order for quality control mechanisms to be developed and quality assessment to be undertaken, it will be necessary to define this purpose in terms of processes, procedures and expected outcomes for each of the academic and administrative units. Each department within the institution will itself have a diversity of goals and objectives and will therefore need to devise its own quality control mechanisms to fulfil the requirements of the institution's quality assurance policy.

### **3.1. Quality and its Assurance: the educational agenda of the XXI century**

The overall capacity and qualities of Japanese universities are critical to achieving the country's vision of becoming an industrialized nation by the year 2020. To ensure the contributions expected of them, Japan universities education should be of high quality in all its endeavours. Universities must deliver programs of the right quality and to customer satisfaction. Their R&D functions must be strengthened to meet the economic needs. Within the industry, the quality movement has not only affected the performance of every stratum of the workforce but has also changed the relationship between fellow workers and their clients. The incorporation of the quality approach in universities however is not going to be easy. Academics tend to act autonomously and independently, and occasionally are

loners or mavericks. Their allegiance tends to be a discipline or subject rather than to an institutions.

Therefore, in any attempt to transform the work philosophy of academia, universities must have a well-defined mission with a diversity of goals and objectives. Each academic unit then will have the responsibility of developing its own quality assurance mechanism to fulfil the requirements of the university's quality standards. To deliver programs of the right quality and customer satisfaction, there must be strengthening of the research and development functions. And to do this, institutions will have to deconstruct what has become something of a "foggy area" in high education research [2]. Clearly, the research means a number of different things and institutions will have to be clearer what kind of research they promote. There will be great variations among institutions but they will still be subject to the functioning of market costs, prices, opportunity costs and benefits; it enhances the core activity of the institution, which is the development of its intellectual capital.

### **3.2. Implementation of a quality approach**

A fundamental principle of implementation is that the administrative effort required does not outweigh the educational benefits received; obviously will be a "degree of subjectivity" in the interpretation of "effort" and "benefit" but if the benefits to be not worth the effort involved, then the quality policy will not be supported effectively. Quality control mechanisms will work at several levels [12]:

- At an *institutional / organizational levels* (the educational delivery, the organizational structure: committee systems, reporting systems, monitoring systems);

- At an *administrative level* (to monitor and give feedback to departments on their performance, to administrate any shortcomings);

- At an *academic level*, the concern will be for the teaching and research elements.

*In teaching*, quality control mechanisms may address such areas as the quality delivery of teaching, tutor/student relationships, management of teaching and assessment procedure.

*In the area of research*, quality control may be concerned with publications, grants received, links with industry, postgraduate research undertaken or industrial application of research.

- At a *support services level*, the concern will be for the quality of services such as computer service, audio and visual aids services, or library facilities, in supporting the teaching and research elements.

- At a *community/national level*, the way in which the achievements of the University support the local community and economy and meet the needs of national educational and economic policy will be paramount.

- At a *student level*, the way in which the University as a whole supports the educational, social, spiritual and moral development of the student will be focus.

#### 4. Honouring traditions while building the future

With the ever-increasing awareness of “knowledge is the key to survival”, Japanese universities must continue to play the traditional role of strengthening the capabilities of doing good science [6]. The following basic perspectives needed to deal with the realities of the XXI century:

- The basic knowledge produced through performing high-quality basic research in various disciplines;
- The skills to apply this knowledge and to communicate it between the scientists and the people;
- The need to continuously update knowledge and skills.

The critical importance of higher education to the economic development of the nation is now widely recognised. To meet the needs of the people in the contemporary world, a prime goal for a university is the development of competences:

- Competence to develop the innovative capacity of industry;
- Competence to stimulate the vitality of university’s own R&D;
- Competence to participate and contribute to national economic development.

High-quality basic research at university and high-quality industrial development work are prerequisites for one another. Therefore, in dealing with the realities of the XXI century, it does not involve abandoning traditions [9]. To neglect the traditional function of the university would be neither desirable nor possible, but it does involve transcending or reformulating tradition to deal with the new realities. The university’s role must therefore focus on people in society, on the service of university to society and on meeting the complex and varied needs of people in the contemporary world. We need to support the growth of the universities in accomplishing the transition, facilitating this transition process with the intention of delivering the opportunities and the “goodies” expected of them. To meet and manage these changing roles of Japanese universities also spells the need for increased expenditures:

- in providing sophisticated instructional support;
- in building scientific and technical competences;
- in increasing and stimulating R&D activities in universities, public agencies and industries.

To answer this, several conclusions from studies carried out in the United States can be highlighted here to drive home the point in favour of *continuing high*

*investment in developing and harnessing educational resources*. In 1986, the National Commission on the Role and Future of State College and Universities concluded that “Ignorance is costly – it is the passageway to a disastrous fall from which America may never recover” [1]. In 1988, Senator Paul Simon pointed out that the cost of not educating disadvantaged young men and women for careers and jobs alone is over US\$255 billion a year in productivity, welfare and expenses related to crime prevention and the criminal justice system [4]. Education is thus a major contributor to economic growth in the United States. Although similar types of studies have not been carried out in Japan, the answer seems clear that “university education helps to create the wealth that finances it” [3].

Japan must continue to increase support for its universities to assume the new role in meeting the social, economic and political needs of the XXI century; for not to do so can only result in national disaster.

#### 5. Conclusions

A viable university education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands a complete rethinking of what an educated person could and should know. The goal must be to attain of what Newman called true enlargement of mind “the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their perspective values, and determining their mutual dependence” (Newman, 1960). One major failure in the present “educating process at universities today is our inability to provide students with this big picture. Their education being more like a series of snapshots that are unrelated and frequently out of focus, under – or over-exposed, or missing a head here, a tail there. The greatest challenge facing us therefore is to ensure that these snapshots are connected. Within 3 – 4 years they are on campus, they ought to be able to complete that puzzles for them to see the big picture they came to the university to see – in all its complexity, diversity and beauty.

Derek Bok (1992), a former Harvard University President, observed this ever-chronic problem facing academia and urged that “Until professors and administrators convince by the public, by their actions, that they indeed make education their top priority – that they are committed to the highest quality of undergraduate education – they will continue to be vulnerable to attacks on curricular, faculty, tuition, and all the different issues for which educators have been taking punishment the last few years.” A corrective action is being urged; New Age University in Japan has set a precedent for rethinking the entire undergraduate programme and eventually for developing administrative structures best suited to accommodate such a programme. It argues for a more coherent and mission-oriented multidisciplinary curriculum. It recognizes the need for a stronger emphasis on board-based edu-

cation. Its curriculum for professional and technical programmes are adequately integrated with liberal arts courses with a humanistic bias, to achieve a desired profile that is based on the total development of an individual as an autonomous but co-operative member of society. The students are systematically encouraged to think, communicate, and make decisions in life and

in work. The desire for knowledge, the longing for education, are still central to the Japanese dream of achieving the statues of fully developed nation by the year of 2020, but if we fail to clarify and define what education means, that dream will slowly fade, becoming less and less likely of fulfilment.

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