

# Quality Assurance in the Era of Mass Higher Education in Japan

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of “quality assurance” has been the focus of much attention in the era of mass higher education in Japan. Many symposia and conferences have been devoted to education quality and hosted by relevant stakeholders in government and in universities. Most of these events have been concerned with various issues surrounding accreditation and assessment activities as performed by external agencies and in alignment with the policies of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). MEXT is particularly important because universities in Japan are quite diverse, united only by MEXT’s jurisdiction over them.

Using J. F. Oberlin University as a specific example, this chapter, therefore, (1) focuses on the general question of “how is quality generated and maintained at the institutional level?” It then (2) explores the implications of practices of the university to clarify the particular range of elements that have emerged within today’s institutional context, and the particular ways

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in which this university has been affected by events within more macro contextual levels. Sources used include Japanese government documents, data from J. F. Oberlin University and the results of previous research in the area of quality education.

### WHO ARE THE EVALUATION BODIES?

The environment surrounding higher education in Japan has changed considerably. Since 2004, all universities, junior colleges and colleges of technology are obliged to undergo review by an evaluation organization certified by MEXT. The purpose of the evaluation is to ensure the quality of higher education institutions (HEIs). Universities are open to receive the more general evaluations of society after the evaluation results are published, implemented, and then plan for self-improvement based on the evaluation results.

Currently, the quality assurance bodies in charge of universities are the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA), the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education (NIAD-QE) and the Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation (JIHEE).

JUAA was established in 1947 under the sponsorship of 46 national, local public and private universities.<sup>1</sup> It was recognized by MEXT as the first Certified Evaluation and Accreditation Agency for universities on August 31, 2004. JUAA currently covers 340 member universities, including 20 national universities, 46 local public universities and 274 private universities. NIAD-QE's predecessor was the NIAD founded in 1991. In 2004, the NIAD-UE was newly established in accordance with the Act on General Rules for Independent Administrative Agency and the Act on the NIAD-UE an Independent Administrative Agency. In January 2005, NIAD-UE was certified by MEXT as an evaluation and accreditation organization for universities. It publicly announced the results of its evaluation of teaching and research activities at national university corporations for the first time in 2009. In 2016, NIAD-QE was established by the merger of NIAD-UE and the Center for National University Finance and Management (CUFM).

In a separate set of decisions, a resolution to establish a third-party institution for the evaluation of private universities was adopted at the 117th general meeting of the Association of Private Universities of Japan (APUJ) in October 2002.<sup>2</sup> APUJ's view was that a flexible and more elastic evaluation system could better correspond to the scale and diversity of

private universities, a decision that resulted from an extensive study of the existing higher education evaluation system in Japan. The establishment of JIHEE was authorized by MEXT in November 2004. The objectives of JIHEE are to evaluate how educational and research activities are conducted at private universities and to assist in their self-initiated endeavors to enhance and improve the quality of higher education. With that mission, its focus is to actively contribute to the overall development of the 340 private universities in Japan. In summary, the ultimate objective of these three agencies is to contribute to the development of higher education by carrying out evaluation duties across a complex set of institutions that differ in important respects.

### HOW IS QUALITY GENERATED AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL?

Japan has the most mature higher education system in East Asia (Umagoshi 2004). However, as indicated, formal governmental quality assurance at the institutional level has existed for just over a decade. The introduction of a quality assurance system within the government was first reflected in a report by the Central Council for Education (CCE).

On August 5, 2002, the CCE, the most important council within MEXT, released “A Report on Building of a New System Which Affects the Quality Assurance of universities,” which emphasized the necessity of creating an overall system of university quality assurance (CCE 2002). As of October 2001, 92 percent of Japanese universities, including national universities, local public and private universities, were conducting some form of self-assessment, with 75 percent publishing what they deemed relevant results, but with only 32 percent of these universities utilizing some form of third-party review. The problems as indicated by the report lay in the fact that almost all self-checking and self-evaluations of quality were conducted and evaluated by the universities themselves. The prevailing view was that it was difficult to ensure public transparency and objectivity of such a process and its subsequent evaluations.

The report cites both international and domestic reasons for introducing some form of a third-party evaluation system nationwide. The international factor lay in the reality that developed countries regard university quality evaluation as an important higher education issue. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, overall emphasis on higher education quality assurance systems was introduced and given stronger emphasis

due to the extraordinary expansion and massification of higher education during these decades. References to such developments in the USA, the UK, France and Germany were increasingly common. Therefore, in the opinion of the CCE, it was necessary to build a quality assurance system that would guarantee education and research quality in Japanese society on a constant basis, in order to ensure the international universality of the level of education and research. The CCE emphasized the possibility of generating changes in the approval system for the establishment of universities. Deregulation and the granting of more flexibility in the establishment of universities were discussed as a major development advantage by the report. In fact, substantial reforms aimed at deregulation and providing for more flexibility in the establishment of new universities were initiated in April 2003.<sup>3</sup> The government intended to establish a general evaluation system for both domestic and international situations as well. As indicated above, a formal evaluation system for universities in Japan was initiated on April 1, 2004 (Tachi 2007). Universities in Japan were thereafter obligated to periodically undergo third-party evaluation.

The root cause of these reforms is the combination of a quantitative expansion of Japanese higher education and the country's declining birthrate. In Japan, the total fertility rates (TFR)—the average number of children a woman bears over her lifetime—bottomed out at 1.26 births per woman in 2005. While “the TFR has been slowly but steadily growing, ... the government is predicting a 0.01-point dip—for 2015.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, on January 28, 2005, CCE released a report entitled “The Future of Higher Education in Japan,” which focused on the new trends in quantitative changes to higher education, and forecasted that the capacity of HEIs would soon reach their saturation point, since the ratio of enrollees to the number of applicants at universities and junior colleges would reach 100 percent by 2007. Therefore, the important issue in the future, stressed by the report, would be the consequent development of higher education in a situation in which anyone can undertake study in the field of their choice and at any time (MEXT 2005).

In retrospect, it can be said that the massification of higher education, combined with a declining birthrate, and the capacity of the system of higher education to satisfy all potential demand have contributed the basic impetus for quality assurance to become a significant issue in Japanese higher education.

## DEFINING CRITERIA

Along with the massification of higher education and its impact on several areas of development, how to protect learners and maintain international validity with respect to perceptions of higher education quality emerged as a significant issue. Finding ways to articulate, measure and assess the criteria associated with providing accurate oversight of quality, therefore, have become a priority for the government.

All of the evaluation criteria with regard to university establishment standards of quality were based on the Ministry of Education's 28th order of 1956. However on July 31, 2007, MEXT issued "The Enforcement such as Departmental Orders to Revise a Part of the University Setting Standards" (Notice) which took effect on April 1, 2008. This notice was based on the previously adopted 2005 policy report "The Future of Higher Education in Japan," and defined measures held necessary to improve educational quality across academic departments as well as the standards that universities should meet in order to clearly guarantee the quality of their education.

The 2007 notice mandates a range of standards and outcomes that all universities must meet, including the following that have specifically related to education at J. F. Oberlin (MEXT 2009): (1) an objective clarification of fields of study, (2) the necessity to make a formal request if professors and facilities are to be distributed across two or more campuses, (3) the formal establishment of class subjects, (4) calculation standards for issuing credits based on two or more methods, (5) clearly stated standards for student evaluation, (6) organized training for faculty development, (7) admission of auditors and other special students, (8) exclusive use of facilities and so on.

Fundamentally, the aforementioned evaluation bodies are charged with performing a comprehensive review of a university's teaching and research on campuses at least once every seven years based on these new standards. Moreover, universities with professional graduate schools will also have their curriculum, faculty organization, and other general education and research situations reviewed at least once every five years based on the 2007 criteria.

## THE PRACTICES AT J. F. OBERLIN

In Japan, it is expected that all universities will make continuous efforts to assure and improve their quality of education and research. For Japanese HEIs, the existing external quality assurance framework consists of the

Quality Assurance and Accreditation System (QAAS), the Standards for Establishing University (SEU) and the establishment-approval system (EAS).

QAAS is a mandatory evaluation for all universities reviewing their overall conditions of education and research. This scheme is conducted by the aforementioned three evaluation bodies.<sup>5</sup> Subject universities can select one or two certified organizations. In general, national university corporations follow the requirements of MEXT and choose NIAD-QE.

The SEU states the basic requirements for establishing a new university. It also functions as a minimum quality standard that existing universities must maintain. SEU covers education and research structures, curricula, academic staff and facilities. The standards are stipulated by the type of institution and school. Universities are responsible for meeting these requirements.

EAS is a systematic process for approving the establishment of a university. MEXT asks the Council for University Chartering and School Corporation to examine applications. The minister subsequently makes a final decision on approval. The council consists of two subcommittees: one focuses on university chartering by examining aspects of teaching and learning,<sup>6</sup> and the other thoroughly examines the process in accordance with relevant regulations, including the standards for the establishment of universities.

Although the threefold quality assurance framework described above exists throughout Japan, the faculty and students of J. F. Oberlin can only participate directly or realize matters organized by QAAS. The other two frameworks of quality assurance, those of the SEU, and the EAS, provide a structure that provides a template of prior regulatory measures for quality assurance. This allows the criteria to be known and made available in advance for use. In the EAS, for example, the head of a university such as the chancellor or president at J. F. Oberlin, will on occasion find it necessary to directly engage with this process and its requirements. For instance, J. F. Oberlin planned to build a new college of global communication in April 2016. Prior to this event, faculty and staff needed to support the chancellor in the process of planning and obtaining a setup permission from EAS. That said, most faculty members are not directly involved in this largely administratively directed process. SEU, on the other hand, will be concerned solely with those organizations that intend to establish a new university.

For most faculty members, quality assurance is most directly connected with their teaching and research roles. Teaching staff<sup>7</sup> are required to prepare complete syllabi for all courses they coordinate at the beginning of a new semester. Here they clearly identify the purpose of the course, provide a detailed schedule of specific methods of extracurricular study appropriate to the course, identify and make clear the marking and evaluation standard and provide information for office hours<sup>8</sup>. In addition, they also specify the appropriate contact method, including providing the office number, phone number and e-mail address. Every professor is required to be in his/her office during their office hours. Moreover, a professor must conduct 15 class sessions each semester in order to guarantee that students will have received the required time deemed appropriate for learning. If a lecture is canceled for some reason, a makeup session is required in all cases. At the end of the semester, student evaluations are conducted for each course. Every professor needs to provide his/her own comments about the results of student evaluation questionnaires and submit that review to his/her research unit head (*gakkeichō*). The research unit head must also provide feedback to the faculty member after reading the student questionnaires and the faculty member's comments.

Around the start of the academic year, all teaching staff must also submit a statement of objectives for the coming year and a self-evaluation for the past year. They will also receive feedback for these submissions from the head of their research unit. A Faculty Development (FD) Committee also convenes FD workshops at this time. J. F. Oberlin also supports a Faculty Development Center, concerned with both FD and the broader issue and process of staff development (SD). The center publishes its annual reports in March every year. For instance it described monthly meetings relating to FD and SD held in 2015 and the three symposia on higher educational issues it hosted in 2014 (J.F. Oberlin Faculty Development Center 2015). The center's annual report also contains details of monthly meetings related to institutional research (IR). Results of IR are published in J. F. Oberlin University's annual *Fact Book*, which is available to all stakeholders of J. F. Oberlin.

Activities related to quality assurance also take place within the framework of the school regulations (*gakusoku*) of J. F. Oberlin University. It can be said that the threefold quality assurance framework comprised of SEU, EAS and QAAS is working to provide an effective and efficient means for quality assurance at J. F. Oberlin University. This is borne out by the positive results of the evaluations by JIHEE in 2006 and 2012 and by JUAA in 2013.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As mentioned above, an overall evaluation system for universities in Japan was created on April 1, 2004, and strict implementation began in 2008. J. F. Oberlin University is one of the institutions that has been evaluated under this system. Within this process and context, it is useful to inquire how these formal, external processes affect how quality is perceived and sought after for the daily operations of the university. In other words, to what extent have these external requirements operated to create a culture of quality within the university?

The education philosophy of J. F. Oberlin emphasizes the cultivation of truly globalized individuals. To succeed as such a person requires having the ability to employ reliable knowledge and skills. To nurture these skills, adequate provision can the inculcation of such outcomes in the classroom needs to be encouraged. Without this assurance, it is impossible to discuss matters of substance concerning students' potential and abilities. Indeed, a commonly cited perception within the country is that many Japanese students cannot explain aspects of their own country while overseas. Inadequate foreign language ability is one part of the problems. The language training resources at an internationalized campus like J. F. Oberlin, provides a means for addressing this issue.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the original motivation for quality assurance at the institutional level in Japanese higher education is to prevent a drop in quality resulting from the quantitative expansion of HEIs. As of August 7, 2014, the rate of college attendance in the country was 51.1 percent of the eligible age cohort. Enrolment in universities peaked in 2011 but witnessed decreases in each of the three consecutive years thereafter (MEXT 2014a) resulting in a significant system level overcapacity of available places for students. Virtually all universities, including J. F. Oberlin, are therefore confronting a management crisis brought about by this combination of massification and the shrinking college age cohort resulting from the declining birthrate. Amid this situation in which the very issue of continued fiscal viability for private HEIs is being called into question, in addition to the evaluation by JUAA cited above, J. F. Oberlin University has received an "A" ranking from the Japan Credit Ranking Agency, Ltd. (JCR). By this review, a full range of stakeholders such as students, their parents, faculty and members of the local community are assured of the reliability of university management (*Daigaku Keiei*) as defined in terms of fiscal reliability. This public



stability provides the university with a competitive edge in the overall recruitment of students.

Cross-border education also benefits directly from quality assurance. Credit transfer for exchange students of the “Reconnaissance Japan Program” at J. F. Oberlin is a concrete example. This academic program for exchange students from overseas partner institutions is also extended to additional selected individual applicants who wish to learn more about Japan and experience it in person. Students may participate in Reconnaissance Japan for either a single semester or a full academic year. The program offers Japanese language skills and training courses along with a wide variety of culture and history courses on Japan taught in English and Chinese and offered each semester. Many students are in fact from China, and when they return to their home universities, J. F. Oberlin’s substantial syllabi assure partner institutions of the quality of its courses and provide concrete grounds for the approval of credits earned by their students while in Japan. In addition, J. F. Oberlin recently implemented a new course numbering system for all subjects to provide additional transparency regarding the level and degree of difficulty of each course.

### CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT CULTURE IN THE ERA OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION

Beginning in 2004, MEXT has exerted strong national leadership in the area of quality assurance throughout Japan. From 2008 onwards, quality assurance as a process and set of outcomes has been embodied at the institutional level. This meets not only the demands of government policy but also those of universities themselves as they seek to meet both domestic and international standards that will assist approximating their goal of internal competitiveness. Quality assurance also allows universities to develop internal cultures of quality that can be tailored to their particular and individual missions. The original purpose of MEXT in promoting formal quality assurance is to prevent a drop in quality resulting from the relatively rapid quantitative expansion of the higher education system while also seeking to strengthen universities’ educational capabilities.

However, compared to the period prior to 2004, activities related to quality assurance have effected various important changes in the man-

agement cultures of and for universities. First, the implementation of the third-party evaluation system has caused universities to pay much more attention to the standards mandated by MEXT in its aforementioned 2008 notice. In fact, the responsibility for institutions receiving a third-party evaluation periodically has changed the role of JUAA, NIAD-QE and JIHEE as they are regularly involved in universities' management. Second, the stakeholders who were previously members of the university management have now changed. Previously, universities managed their own affairs. Within the current system, university managers are required to pay much more attention to their students, students' parents and members of the local community in order to enhance their reliability among these critical reference groups. The results of evaluations conducted by JUAA, NIAD-QE and JIHEE, when positive, have become highly instrumental for increasing the credibility of reviewed universities. Finally, universities in Japan had been hidebound "ivory towers" for over 55 years, until the creation of the evaluation system in 2004. As discussed above, the historical combination of overcapacity among Japanese universities and a declining national birthrate fundamentally changed the nature of Japanese higher education. Universities were forced to improve the overall quality of the education they provided in order to survive, and the evaluation system provided the objective standards universities needed to achieve that goal.

In conclusion, quality assurance in Japanese higher education not only has ensured the public transparency and objectivity of universities but has also improved their ability to recruit students and gain needed recognition from overseas institutions. These quality assurance activities have also strengthened the overall educational capacities of the higher education system. One inescapable conclusion is that the effect of these external requirements has operated to change and improve the conventional culture of university management to the overall benefit of their institutions.

## NOTES

1. JUAA is using several US accreditation agencies as a model. It started accrediting activities in 1951 for universities applying for full membership in JUAA, and revised its university accreditation system based on requesting a "self-study" by each university in 1996.

2. The same resolution was also approved at the 119th, 120th and 121st general meetings of APUJ in October 2003, March 2004 and October 2004, respectively. Available online at <http://www.jiheec.or.jp/en/about/objectives.html>. Accessed: May 5, 2015.
3. For details, please refer to *2006 Year Edition MEXT White Paper*. Available online at [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/hakusho/html/hpab200601/002/003/006.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/html/hpab200601/002/003/006.htm). Accessed: May 8, 2015.
4. *The Japan Times*. “Japan and its birthrate: the beginning of the end or just a new beginning?” Available online at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2016/02/10/voices/japan-birth-rate-beginning-end-just-new-beginning/#.V10cp9eyA7A>. Accessed: May 6, 2016.
5. These are called Certified Evaluation and Accreditation Organizations in Japan.
6. The other is on school corporations for financial planning and management.
7. All full-time teaching staff is part of a research unit.
8. Twice a week, 180 minutes.

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