

## Higher Education Studies in Japan

KANEKO, Motohisa\*

*The rapid development of higher education in the postwar period has given rise to various problems, and higher education studies in Japan have developed in response to them. What have been the major issues, and how did academic research respond to them, in postwar Japan? This article delineates an outline of higher education studies in general, describes a few major research paradigms set forth by generations of researchers, and examines the present status of higher education in Japan and the challenges it presents for higher education studies.*

In any area of study in education, academic interests reflect actual issues. This tendency appears more pronounced in the field of higher education than in others. Rapid development of higher education in the postwar period has caused various problems, and higher education studies has developed in the process to respond to them. This paper discusses the major issues related to higher education in postwar Japan, and how academic research responded to them. The first section presents a general outline of higher education studies. Part 2 describes a few major research paradigms set forth by generations of researchers, and finally, Part 3 examines the present situation of higher education in Japan, and the challenges that exist for higher education studies.

### 1. Scope of Higher Education Studies

In the field of education, higher education studies is not only a relatively young subfield, but also has distinctive characteristics in its scope, methodology and theoretical basis as compared to other subfields.

#### Scope and Issues

It was only after the World War II that higher education emerged as an institution with significant consequences for a wide range of society and population (Kaneko 2004). Researchers began to take an academic interest in higher education as a result of various actual policy and practical issues. As a consequence, higher education studies covered a very wide range of research topics.

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\*Division of Research, Center for National University Finance and Management, Japan  
e-mail: kaneko@zam.go.jp

The wide range of coverage is presented in Table 1, and major research themes are listed under three broad categories. The first category of the topics is concerned with institutional and macroscopic aspects of the higher education system, such as legal framework, chartering and accreditation, finance and policy. The second category is concerned with the social function of higher education, such as employment of graduates, equity of opportunity of higher education, and links to industry or local community through research, education and social services. The third category includes themes related to the actual processes of teaching and learning, including definitions of the mission, curriculum, teaching practices, pedagogy, learning behaviors and faculty development.

### Approach and Method

In addition to the existence of close links to actual issues, diverse topics, and short history, there is a notable absence of established basic theory and common research methodology.

Indeed, various methods and analytical tools were borrowed from various academic disciplines as the subject demanded. Historical and international comparison have been the most common approach to many of the topics listed in Table 1. Moreover, various concepts and methods were employed from other disciplines: law and public administration, and public finance for the first category of topics,, sociology and economics for the second category,, and pedagogy and educational psychology for the third category.

Many studies in this field depend on historical documents, publications, and policy documents from Japan or international sources. Another source of information has been the macroscopic statistics made available by government agencies. One salient trend in recent years has been the development of data produced by large scale surveys. In recent years surveys have been conducted on college graduates, faculty members and managerial staff members. These data may eventually change the culture of higher education studies as a field of academic research. Its implications will be discussed in Section 3.

### Theory and Paradigm

It seems evident that higher education studies in Japan has yet to establish a solid theoretic-

Table 1 Major Topics of Higher Education Studies

A. Institution and Organization	Institution and Policy	Legal framework, Degrees, Chartering and Accreditation, Finance, Policy
	Higher Education System	Institutional Differentiation, Organizational Settings
	Institutional Governance and Management	Institutional Governance, Management, Personnel
B. Social Function	Employment of Graduates	Labor Market, Relevance, Skills and Knowledge, Competence
	Equity	Equity of Opportunity
	Link to National Economic/Local Community	Research, Service Function, Regional Development
C. Content and Process	Mission and Curriculum	Mission, Curriculum, General Education
	Teaching	Teaching Practices, Pedagogy, Admission
	Student and Teachers	Learning Behavior, Faculty Development

cal basis. One may even argue that it will not secure such a basis for some time to come. This does not necessarily imply, however, that higher education studies have always been a set of fragmented research studies without any foundation. Indeed, there have been a few major research paradigms that provided the core of academic interest, helped generate empirical research, and integrated research results.

Given the nature of higher education studies, these paradigms have also been closely related to particular issues that have emerged over the course of rapid development of higher education. Each of these paradigms appeared in a particular social context and evolved over time. The development of higher education studies in Japan can thus be understood as the process of developments in the three major paradigms described as follows.

## 2. Major Paradigms

There have been three major paradigms in Japanese higher education: i) institutional autonomy and academic freedom; ii) massification and universalization of higher education, and iii) evaluation, deregulation and incorporation.

### **Autonomy of University and Academic Freedom**

Even though there existed academic research before WW II on the subject of higher education, especially as a part of studies on European history, it was not until the 1950s that substantial numbers of academic papers and analyses appeared. To an extent, this was a reflection of the social interest in the new educational system introduced as a part of the postwar reform. There were, however, more particular reasons why institutional autonomy was placed at the center of intensive debates.

In the prewar period, universities failed to be strongholds for resistance against fascism and militarism. Prominent scholars with liberal ideas were ousted from universities under pressure of the totalitarian government. Even though the principle of academic freedom was accepted legally in the prewar regime, it turned out to be fragile and ineffective. This prompted attempts in academia to clarify the formation of academic freedom, and more generally, the idea of the university.

Because of this historical experience, academics after the war tended to believe that academic freedom is equivalent to governance undertaken by university and by faculty. That implied that the prewar system of the control of professorial senate and an elected president had to be reestablished and given even greater power. From a legal standpoint, however, this would have left no room for public control. The Ministry of Education then tried to introduce a “University Governance Act” which provided for the establishment of a Governing Board for each national university that consisted of both academics and lay members. The government’s plan prompted an intense resistance from faculty members and students who, under the political ideology of the Cold War, took these moves as an attempt of the conservative government to tighten their control of higher education institutions. The bill was introduced into the Diet a few times, but was eventually abandoned. Nonetheless, the issue of governance lingered, to be revived in the context of student unrest in the 1960s.

The issue was on one hand political, but on the other hand academic: why should university be granted autonomy, and how did the Japanese universities fail to materialize it?

This question prompted an exploration into the historical paths of higher education in both Japan and in Western countries' systems of higher education. Iyenaga (1965), Igasaki (1965), and Terasaki (1979) have been the representative academic achievements. It is important to note that these early works took the form of studies on *history*. Indeed, Japanese higher education studies were born when historical approaches provided the basis for the actual interest in higher education to be elevated into academic pursuits. The first generation of studies heavily influenced subsequent generations, who started with a historical approach and then extended it to other social sciences. Meanwhile, purely historical studies on higher education remained as one of the significant approaches to date.

### **Massification and Human Capital**

After the initial stage of post war recovery, an epoch of rapid economic growth started in the beginning of the 1960s and continued until the mid 1970s. This caused an unprecedented expansion of the demands for enrollment in higher education. Participation rate in four-year higher education institutions, which was below 10 percent-level in the 1960, rose beyond the 30 percent-level by 1975.

Eventually, it became evident that this explosive expansion resulted in dismal conditions particularly in the private institutions, which increased their enrollments for financial reasons. These factors, combined with the particular social and economic setting, prompted the student unrest of the late 1960s. Thus, higher education became one of the most salient social issues of the time.

This situation raised various academic questions. Should expansion of higher education be continued at the same rapid pace? What proportion of youths should be attending college? What are the problems inherent with the expanded enrollment?

While these questions were basic ones, it was particularly research in the Sociology of Education that responded to these challenges. Sociology of Education, being a new field itself, was flexible enough to widen its view to cover these new phenomena. While it lacked particular methodology, its tenet to view "education as a social fact" proved to be particularly effective in approaching the emerging new sector of education. In this context the field discovered several more paradigms.

One could be characterized as *human capital investment* and *manpower planning*. The former argued that education should be considered as an investment in human capital, which will increase production in future. The latter provided a mathematical framework which related the future economic development to the demands for educated labor, and also to the optimal size of enrollment in higher education institutions. These paradigms stimulated a number of researchers to engage in various types of macro-economic indicators to examine economic implications of expansion of higher education.

Another was the concept of "*massification*." It is well known that Martin Trow set forth a theorem that higher education follows a sequence of development from the *elite* stage to the *mass* stage, and then to the *universalized* stage. As it transforms from one stage to the next, higher education system changes in various aspects. This three-stage model provided a basis with which to address the questions above. Expansion of higher education is not anomalous; it can be expected that over time higher education evolves from something only for the elites to an opportunity that is available to anyone. Meanwhile, various aspects of higher education have had to change to accommodate the changing student bodies and social context. This concept proved to be useful to

point out the problems created in the rapid expansion of higher education in Japan, where quantitative expansion had failed to accompany corresponding structural reforms (Ushiogi, 1973; Kitamura, 1980; Amano 1986).

### **Evaluation, Deregulation and Incorporation**

The epoch of expansion yielded to the following epoch of stagnation in the late 1970s and 1980s. After the expansion of higher education, there were growing concerns about excessive growth in government spending. This led to government initiatives for administrative reforms to control the level of government spending, while concurrently relaxing government regulations. Market functions were expected to take over the functions of government in various aspects of social services.

Evaluation of higher education institutions became the most salient paradigm within this context. There were two trends characterizing this paradigm. One was the introduction of an accreditation system. In an early stage of postwar reform, government regulations on higher education institutions were replaced with a system of accreditation. In subsequent years, however, this accreditation system failed to be effective, and government control based on the Establishment Standards (Daigaku Secchi Kijun) became the sole, and most powerful, instrument for quality control. There had been criticisms that the Standards had become excessively complex to the extent that spontaneous reform initiatives were hindered. In 1991, the Standards were simplified, and a new scheme of accreditation was instituted.

The other important trend was the implementation of performance evaluation as an instrument for government control and budget allocation. This was a trend not unique to Japan but common to other countries, especially in Europe. It is known that the systems of evaluating academic departments and its application to budget distribution in the UK had a strong influence on Japanese policy makers, as it did elsewhere in the World.

Both of these two influential trends motivated a number of researchers to examine and discuss the nature of accreditation and performance evaluation. Most of those studies took the form of comparative analyses of the institutions and practices in the U.S., Europe, and in other countries.

Another important paradigm was *incorporation* of national universities. As stated above, governance of national universities became a significant issue in the 1950s, but it failed to result in concrete reform. As a consequence, the legal relations between the government and national universities were left with a degree of ambiguity. Under the move towards administrative reform in the 1990s, a redefinition of the legal status of national universities was taken up again as a significant political issue. This move eventually materialized into the National University Corporation Law of 2004, by which all the national universities were transformed into National University Corporations (NUCs). Each NUC was designated as an independent body under the stipulation of civil law, even though it would continue to receive substantial financial subsidies from the government.

Such reforms on the relations between government and public institutions of higher education that have led towards indirect control by the government have been seen in many parts of the world since the 1990s. Local decision-making should ideally replace the direct mandate by the central government. It was argued that, if public institutions are provided with more autonomy, they will be able to achieve a greater degree of efficiency, because they are given the motivation and the room for adjusting to local needs. Individual institutions should therefore be controlled

indirectly through such instruments as evaluation, contracts and performance-based funding.

Despite this seemingly superior model, the actual working of such a regime seems to have entailed many problems. The Japanese model of NUC was no exception. Many researchers participated in discussions regarding this reform. Some were engaged in empirical studies to measure the changes in financial structure after incorporation, others surveyed opinions of university presidents and influential faculty members. A number of research was conducted that did international comparison, while others were based on theoretical issues such as the New Public Management Theory.

### **3. Challenges and Prospects**

Most of the issues described above still remain relevant. At the same time, new issues are emerging and higher education studies will need to respond to them. There are three major areas where higher education studies are currently challenged.

#### **Teaching and Learning in Higher Education**

Foremost among them is teaching and learning in higher education. The emergence of this topic reflects a long-term shift in the focus of the development of higher education from quantitative expansion that lasted for the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to qualitative restructuring. This shift is caused by a number of social and economic factors.

Globalization of the economy has increased the importance of producing highly skilled college graduates, but at the same time it reduces the number employment opportunities for an increasing number of college graduates. Moreover, the achievement of universalized higher education implies that there will be more demands on resources due to the aging population, cost of health-care and pension expenditures. Uncertain prospects in labor markets and the universalization of higher education appear to have changed the aspirations and career prospect of college students, with significant consequences in terms of motivation to learn. All of these factors collaborate to cause new and formidable problems in higher education. (Kaneko 2007)

Obviously, teaching and learning should have been included among the original research themes in higher education studies. Nonetheless, there has been peculiar absence in systematic studies on this topic. One exception is the research that evolved from general education in the undergraduate curriculum. General education was first introduced as one of the higher education reforms to take place after World War II. The new scheme encountered a number of difficulties. The concept itself was foreign to Japanese academics, who had been brought up under the Humboldtian idea of a research university. New faculty members were appointed to teach courses in general education, but they had to struggle to be accepted as legitimate members of the academia.

The appointment of faculty members to teach in general education prompted more research on the concept and practices of general education by the practitioners. Eventually, these activities resulted in the establishment of the Liberal and General Education Society of Japan in 1979, which became the first academic association for higher education studies.

While these accomplishments have provided a significant basis for future research, it is clear that the challenges of the 21st century described above necessitate a much wider scope and methodology of research. In fact, there is a rising academic interest in teaching and learning among a wide spectrum of researchers in higher education. Recent annual meetings of the Japanese

Association of Higher Education Research, which has the largest membership in this field, attest to this trend.

One salient trend in this field in last five years has been the development of large-scale surveys of students. The author and his associates undertook a large-scale survey of about 45,000 undergraduates in 124 institutions of higher education (CRUMP, 2010). This research group is also undertaking a series of large-scale surveys, including a longitudinal survey of 4,000 high school seniors from their graduation from high school to their graduation from college. Other surveys have included a survey on working adults (24,000 respondents), a survey of personnel officers (6,000 relevant sample), a survey of faculty members (4,000) and a survey of university administrators (4,000). In addition, Yamada and associates surveyed Japanese students with questionnaires similar to the UCLA survey (Yamada, 2009).

Some of the results from initial analyses on the CRUMP survey yielded interesting results. For example, it was found that there are substantial numbers of students who are not only uncertain about their future careers, but are also unsure whether college education helps them to prepare for the future. The percentage of students responding thus were not necessarily lower in the more selective institutions than those in less selective institutions. The findings also indicated that the career prospects of students are positively correlated to the time spent studying in general. Furthermore, some teaching styles, especially those requiring active student participation, are positively related to the time spent studying—while rigorous requirements for attendance had no, or even negative, influence on study habits.

These results have indicated that large-scale surveys covering different fields of specialization and institutions, do in fact provide significant insights into the improvement of college education. Moreover, it has been made clear that even though these surveys had significant limitations in terms of insufficient variables representing academic achievement, the amount of time that students spend on education can be a quite useful alternative variable in analyzing educational performance.

Nevertheless, these research activities have revealed important analytical and theoretical difficulties. First, there are a great number of variables that could potentially be important in teaching and learning, and the permutations among them could create an almost infinite number of correlates. Moreover, these correlates may vary across a given subpopulation. As a result, it is difficult to be confident that one has exhausted important facts to be derived from the data. In the actual process of analyses, this raises a serious difficulty. In recent years, a statistical algorithm called as “Data Mining” has become popular to cope with these situations, but the procedure entails its own problems. Ultimately, the problem should be dealt with by accumulating a wide body of knowledge from empirical analyses and by building relevant hypotheses.

Second, these surveys depend on questionnaires that ask about students’ own accounts of their behavior and performance. This quantitative method does not provide an adequate basis for analyzing such critical phenomenon as the process of learning, or the interaction between different teaching practices and students’ dispositions. More intensive and qualitative studies are called for. A similar problem applies to the analysis of the relevance of higher education to future employment.

Third, empirical analyses has so far suggested that the structure of teaching-learning varies significantly by discipline. It was found also that the effect of a particular type of teaching varies widely across institutions. These results show that a general analyses of teaching and learning can play only limited roles; if research studies are expected to help reform education in practice, they

should be undertaken locally at the relevant institution and within a specific academic discipline. Large-scale surveys are certainly indispensable to benchmark the results of the local analyses. In reality, however, the capacity of individual institutions for collecting and analyzing data tends to be severely limited.

There is a need to find good solutions for these theoretical and practical problems, and responding to these challenges still requires a great deal of effort.

### **Market, Control and Information**

The second significant challenge that must be dealt with is changes that have taken place in the arrangement of higher education as a social institution. For a long time, higher education has been controlled by the government in many significant ways, while the market has provided the basis for demands and supply of the opportunity of higher education. The relationship between the government and markets is about to change.

Although this issue has been actively discussed since the 1980s in Japan and elsewhere in the world, the scope of analysis appears to be moving to a new stage. Up until recently, marketization has been talked about as an abstract and general concept; now it is a given reality in many ways, and it has become increasingly clear that the concept of marketization is multifaceted and consists of various aspects.

The first is in the function and changes in macroscopic structure by which resources are mobilized from the society and allocated to higher education. The postwar expansion of higher education was achieved mainly by the growth of the private sector of higher education, which were predominantly dependent on tuition revenues. The arguments that expenditure on higher education should be considered as an investment, and therefore should be born by the society as a whole, urged the government to increase revenues for the private institutions. Since the end of the last century, the structure has shifted again. In contrast to the United States, Japanese families were said to have been willing to pay for education even with substantial sacrifice. However, since 2005, it has become increasingly clear that families have become less hesitant to depend on loans to pay for their children's college education.

The long-term effect of the dependency on loans is not necessarily clear. One possible consequence would be the high cost required to get a better-quality education, which may present a new form of inequality in opportunity.

The second issue is the function of quasi-market mechanism in higher education. As stated previously, one of the major premises of New Public Management Theory was that educational efficiency would be improved by replacing direct control with budget allocation combined with performance evaluation. Since the 1980s, there have been many reforms heading toward this direction everywhere in the world. It seems evident now, however, that those attempts were at best half-successful. Evaluation-based funding accounts for a relatively small proportion in most of these cases. The Japanese National University Corporation scheme has assumed a thorough evaluation and budget allocation system. The first evaluation scheme was undertaken in 2009, but the government did not choose to link the results to budget allocation in any significant proportion. The limited success of the evaluation-allocation scheme deserves a more systematic analyses.

Third, a common basis for issues of market and control is information. Even though higher education's major functions entail handling information, it has not been proactive in revealing its own information. Information about institutional activities have been kept inside on the belief of academic freedom and autonomy—since academic pursuits are specialized and beyond the under-

standing of laymen, its control should be left to those with specialized knowledge. This belief, however, has been challenged increasingly, as higher education has become a significant social institution interlocked with the rest of society and economy. In retrospect, the emergence of institutional evaluation and rankings was but a first step to respond to claims from the public for universities to share information. As experiences of the past few decades demonstrate, many of these measures were crude and ineffective, and even unconstructive, but it does not imply that they were unnecessary.

What kind information do we need, and how will it be extracted? How should it be maintained and used? Who should be responsible to maintain accurate information? These questions should be addressed in future research.

### **Institutional Management and Feed-back Track**

It was stated above that quality will likely become the central issue, and enhancement of quality cannot be achieved without local initiatives. This raises questions regarding how local decisions are made so that in aggregate they result in greater efficiency and higher levels of teaching and learning. There are three research issues involved in this endeavor.

First, accompanying the changes to be expected, institutional governance will become more transparent. Although Japanese private institutions of higher education emulated the American model in their legal frameworks, there are significant differences due to historical and economic backgrounds. Some small institutions are practically controlled by the individual who established the institution, and his or her family members. In many other institutions, academic and some administrative workers constitute a majority on the Board of Trustees. Another related issues is that the decrease in the college-going population will eventually lead to closure of some institutions. In that context, the issue of governance will become an even more critical issue.

The incorporated national universities has a peculiar governance structure. The president of the university appoints an executive board, and the president is in effect elected by the faculty members in most cases. This arrangement, unique in international comparison, is partly a consequence of political process. Incorporation of national universities took place at the same time that other government agencies were incorporated, and the contract between the government and administrative agencies served as the basis for this process. Whether such a scheme is effective when applied to higher educational institutions deserves further discussion.

Second, financing will be one of the most critical issues in the age of financial stringency arising from reductions in governmental outlays and a stagnating or even shrinking enrollment. It is inevitable that large numbers of national and private institutions will have to face the question of financial viability, while at the same time they will be required to invest substantially in improvements, especially with respect to education.

Under these circumstances, it is essential that each individual institution has its own capacity to build a strategic financial plan. This is a new challenge for many institutions that have been under the regime of excess demands or strict government control and support. It should also be noted that new government requirements for disclosure of financial structures imply that individual institutions will have to justify their use of resources. Building capacities of financial management will be one of the critical challenges facing institutions.

Third, these factors demonstrate that individual institutions need to have the support of intermediary agents that are able to connect macroscopic needs to the decision making of the institutions. Such mediator agents include funding councils, accrediting bodies, presidents' councils,

associations of institutions, and professional associations of college administrators and other professionals. Recently, various agents have emerged to comprehensively organize the monitoring of teaching outcomes, and relay those data back to each institution and the teaching faculty. This mechanism may become one of the most powerful devices to induce changes in college education.

Since most of these agents were created by specific needs associated with various political contexts, their organization and scope of function vary widely from one country to another. Systematic analyses on this subject will be significant both theoretically and practically.

## Conclusion

This discussion suggests that further research studies are needed to respond to the number of challenges faced by higher education. These will play even greater roles in determining the future of higher education, while at the same time, it is important to note that there are many important tasks to be achieved if such studies are to develop further.

On one hand, higher education studies have been closely connected with the actual issues of higher education. This trait has become even more pronounced than before. The Japanese Association of Higher Education Research, which was established in 1997 and is now the largest of relevant associations, still sees rapid growth in its membership. New members tend to be college administrators and other professionals related to higher education. The strong link with real issues will become even greater.

On the other hand, the present review has suggested that as a body of knowledge, the field has not yet succeeded in building a common basis for research and analysis. While various paradigms have played significant roles in generating important research and integrating them to an extent, they have not been organized under a unified theoretical framework.

These two tasks, even though seemingly contradicting, should be strived for mutually. When we accomplish these tasks, higher education studies will become a mature and vital field of academic pursuit.

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