

Institutional Research in a University without Regular Institutional Management

The Case of Japanese National Universities

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Abstract—This paper examines the background of why institutional research does not function well in Japanese universities, and especially in national universities. It compares institutional research in Japan and the US by its mission, reporting line, and the services it provides, and points out that Japanese institutional research is not effectively linked to administrative decision making. It also argues that the lack of regular institutional management established at national universities makes it difficult for institutional researchers to provide effective service to the university. It concludes that although the establishment of institutional management on a regular basis is vital and has to be introduced in the long run for Japanese universities to prosper, the most effective tactic right now for institutional research offices may be to support the central administration in areas of strategic planning in the first place, and then gradually shift to supporting regular institutional management.

Keywords—*institutional research, university management, regular institutional management, administration, decentralized governance system.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of evidence-based decision making has gained ground globally. With economic recession in many developed countries around the world, there is increased demand for effective use of public funding, which calls for greater accountability towards society. Performance indicators are increasingly used for policy assessment and resource allocation, and quantitative data sets and empirical studies leading to objective evidence are in great demand.

The higher education sector is no exception. Massification of higher education has led to tight budgetary constraints on its public funding. It has also led to more people being aware of the higher education sector, i.e. there is greater demand for accountability in that sector. There exists a fundamental gap between what universities provide and what people expect, since many universities in principle have not changed their governance or teaching style which was established in medieval times when only a minority elite participated in academia. This also leads to increased tension between universities and society.

Institutional research arose from these pressures for effective use of public funding of higher education and for enhanced accountability to society. Institutional research offices already existed in the 1950s in the United States, but

real growth in the field came from the 1960s to the 1980s, when students started protesting against authoritarian university leadership and when economic recession followed and lasted for decades. The idea of performance-based funding for public universities grew at that time, and universities' institutional research offices were placed on a firm footing so as to handle the internal administrative procedures of such funding schemes [1].

In contrast to institutional research in the United States, which has a history of about half a century, in other developed countries the need for university reform and efficient university management became clear only in the 1990s. The low rate of higher education enrollment, which stayed below 40% until recently with mainly traditional students, and the fact that higher education was provided mainly by the public sector, might be the two main reasons for this. In a country such as the United States, where both private and public universities co-exist, and where private universities are self-supported, public universities are constantly under close scrutiny regarding transparency and efficiency in their use of budget. In other countries where higher education is regarded as public good, there is little question of public funding for higher education. Efficiency and transparency in the public sector in these countries came into question only after the proliferation of neoliberalism in public policy, started by Margret Thatcher in the 1980s.

Japan, on which this paper focuses, also did not see the need for efficiency and transparency in the public sector until the late 1990s. Japan had seen tremendous economic growth after the war, often referred to as the East Asian Miracle. This was accelerated by the Plaza Accord in 1987 and lasted until the early 1990s. At that time there was a widespread belief that increased public investment lead to increased economic growth. Japan has a mixture of private, public and national institutions in the higher education sector. But since public and national universities charge tuition fees as well as the private universities, and private universities are partly funded by the government as well as the public and national universities, the differences between these different institutions are not as distinct as in the United States. Economic growth from the 1960s to the 1980s, which also induced the growth and expansion of private universities, kept private universities' criticism of public and national universities to a minimum.

It was only after the economic bubble crashed in 1992 and the Japanese economy stagnated for almost two decades

that Japan started to cut back in public spending and efficiency and transparency in the use of public funding came into question. The tough elimination of public works, known as *jigyō-shiwake* (project screening), destroyed the myth that the public sector was protected from all external forces. Privatization was promoted in the public sector, including in higher education. Not only did the use of public funds but the art of delivery of teaching at universities come into question. A series of governmental reports by the Central Council for Education (*Chuou Kyouiku Shingikai*) called for efficient and effective undergraduate, graduate, and professional education, among other reforms.

Institutional research offices were set up in Japanese universities to respond to this severe sea change. University administrators clearly saw the need for an institutional research arm in their own universities, and the shrinking of public funding to higher education has made clearer than ever the need for and importance of institutional research offices.

Despite general recognition of the importance of an institutional research function in universities, institutional research offices in Japanese universities face challenges in gaining a firm footing within their own universities. They often see little growth in staff numbers and budget. There are universities which choose to shut down their institutional research offices and disperse their functions to existing administrative units. Staff in institutional research offices often find their offices to be still at a very preliminary stage of development, and are often concerned for their future. Most studies on institutional research in Japan focus on describing and introducing institutional research in other countries, mainly that of the United States, and there are no studies on institutional research methodologies, which are in abundant supply in the United States. A few papers on “Japanese-style institutional research”, however, have been published [2, 3]. The Institute of Regional Studies held six lectures on “Establishing and Strengthening Japanese-style Institutional Research” from 2009 to 2011. These may suggest the necessity of establishing Japanese-style institutional research, and the peculiarity of Japan where US-style institutional research does not fit.

This paper examines the background as to why ordinary US-style institutional research fails to gain ground in Japanese universities. It compares institutional research in Japan and the US by its mission, reporting line, and its service, and discusses the challenges faced by the institutional research offices and proposes ways to change in order to gain greater acceptance for institutional research in Japanese universities.

II. COMPARISON OF JAPANESE AND US INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

A. *The Mission of Institutional Research*

There are a variety of approaches to defining institutional research: from its purpose [4], its function [5, 6], its mission [7], the services it provides [8, 9], the role of institutional researchers [10], and the size and staffing of institutional research offices [11]. But the most simple and widely

accepted definition is the one proposed by the Association for Institutional Research: “*Institutional research is research conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information which supports institutional planning, policy formation and decision making*” [12]. Institutional research is seen to have evolved from fulfilling the passive role of information resource provider to that of information activist [1, 13]. Hence, many of the recent definitions stress the role of institutional research in supporting institutional planning, policy formation, and decision making [10, 14]. With additional functions of data management and internal and external reporting, most functions of institutional research are covered.

Fundamental to institutional research is that it leads to decision making of the university administration either through support for assessment, planning, policy formation, or decision making itself. It is therefore critical that institutional research is integrated into the university decision making process [13, 15], and that institutional researchers are closely linked with university administrators [14].

On the contrary, Japanese institutional research offices generally lack the functions of supporting policy formation and decision making. Kominato and Nakai [16] analyze the function of institutional research in three Japanese national universities based on the classification by Thorpe [7]. Their key findings are as follows: institutional research offices (1) in all three universities perform data management, data analysis, internal reporting, and assessment support, (2) in two out of three perform planning support, (3) in one out of three conduct research studies, or external reporting, (4) and in none do they support decision making or policy formation. A study on institutional research function for Japanese private universities shows that 72.7% of all institutional research offices cover data management and data providing functions, but only 50.5% perform data analysis, and only 45.4% support planning of university reform based on data analysis [17]. These studies underscore the concern of institutional researchers in Japan that their work does not affect university-wide decision making.

It can be concluded from these studies that decision making or policy formation is not a major function of Japanese institutional research offices. In fact, most institutional research offices at national universities are set up to deal with accreditation or university evaluation procedures linked to governmental funding [16], and institutional research offices at private universities focus on educational administration, dealing with effectiveness in teaching and learning [18]. In the case of national universities, institutional research offices are set up at the central administration level, but their mission is focused on preparing self-evaluation reports to fulfill accountability requirements towards funding agencies and society in general and there is little emphasis on using its work for university improvement or reform. In this case, university administrators also regard the institutional research office as such, and do not ask the offices to support policy formation or decision making. In the case of private universities, institutional research offices are usually named as “Center

for Teaching and Learning”, and even though such centers are under central administrative control, they are separate from the central administration, and thus are able to influence central administration only indirectly. At the same time, their influence on improving teaching and learning are limited, as these take place at the departmental level.

B. Reporting Line

Whether institutional research can lead to decision making depends heavily on where the institutional research office is organizationally set up, and to whom the office reports. Studies stress that “*Administrators play a critical role in enabling institutional researchers to produce successful studies*” [14], “*Placing the research office under an assistant vice-president weakens the institution’s ability to make considered judgments using valid and reliable information*” [19], and “*Offices must be placed high enough in the organizational structure for the staff to be aware of the major issues and decisions facing senior management*” [20]. Billups and Delucia suggest researchers of institutional research offices observe carefully where decision making is taking place and where their audience is, so as to be integrated into organizational goals and be able to become effective in university decision making [13].

Institutional research offices in the United States report in most cases to the president or to the provost, i.e. to decision makers of the highest rank. A study shows that 38% of institutional research offices in the United States are located under “academic affairs/provost”, 26% under the “president/chancellor”, 8% under “business affairs/services”, 5% under “development/alumni”, 4% under “student affairs/services”, and 18% to other units [21].

On the contrary, it is fairly uncommon for Japanese institutional research offices to report directly to the president. Additionally, Japanese universities do not have provosts. Even if the institutional research office is located under the president, this is mainly for formal university evaluation and accreditation purposes, and does not lead to supporting university decision making. In Japanese private universities, support for teaching and learning is the main function of institutional research offices, which gives them only indirect influence on high-level decision makers.

C. Service of Institutional Research

Volkwein suggests classifying the functions of institutional research offices by their customers: (1) academic affairs support reporting to the provost, (2) business/finance support reporting to the chief financial officer, (3) enrollment management working with financial aid and admissions offices, and (4) student affairs support working with student affairs offices [22]. Here, the place where these functions take place in Japanese universities is examined, based on Volkwein’s classification.

1) *Academic affairs support*: This includes analyses of faculty workload, salaries, faculty publications, citations, honors, awards, services, student evaluation of instruction, and compilation of indicators of their quality and effectiveness.

Faculty review and analysis are still at very preliminary stage in Japanese universities. Recruiting and retaining top faculty are of the highest strategic importance in US universities, but are less important in Japan because of the size of the country and lack of any other Japanese-speaking country. Faculty workload and salary are rarely a concern, and even if the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) occasionally asks for such data, the data gathered is almost never used for internal purposes. Faculty reviews are also less common, and when they are conducted, they only collect solid data, whereas US universities combine peer and external reviews and student evaluation. Faculty hiring and promotion occur mainly at department level, and there is little need for university-wide faculty analysis. There is also no provost who would be accountable for faculty and academic affairs.

In short, there is no section in Japanese universities that deals with faculty and academic affairs and thus, institutional research in these fields is not performed in Japanese universities.

2) *Business/finance support*: This includes performing revenue projections, tuition pricing studies, fundraising analysis, setting resource allocation criteria, and compilation of indicators of productivity, efficiency and cost.

The operations and finances of Japanese private universities are in most cases managed by a governing body called a “*Gakkou-Houjin*”, which thoroughly conducts revenue projections, tuition pricing studies, and so on. On the other hand, national universities, which were part of MEXT until 2003, have less of a tradition and less experience of management and administration of their own operations and finances. National universities gained autonomy in 2004 through the National University Corporation Act, but this gave them only marginal freedom. For instance, universities still have little freedom in setting tuition fees, faculty numbers, and student enrollment numbers. This makes any financial analyses meaningless. There is also little freedom in changing the design of departments and schools, and thus, resource allocation is still conducted basically on the allocation formula in place prior to incorporation. There are calls for increased efficiency and cost-cutting for university services in general—such as a 10% cut across every unit—but no sophisticated efforts have been made to analyze the productivity, efficiency, and costs quantitatively of each units individually.

To summarize, business and finance support services are provided at Japanese private universities, but rarely at national universities because there is little flexibility in university management.

3) *Enrollment management*: This includes performing enrollment projections, admissions marketing studies, retention and graduation estimates, alumni studies, and financial aid analysis.

Enrollment management is a vital issue for private universities, which rely heavily on tuition revenues. Enrollment projections, admissions marketing studies, and so forth are carried out either by the admissions office or finance office reporting directly to the president’s office.

Financial aid is increasingly common at private universities, as are financial aid analyses. In the case of national universities, admissions marketing studies are becoming common as several regional national universities are suffering under-enrollment. But since national universities have little freedom to set their own tuition fees or student enrollment numbers as described in the previous section, enrollment projections for financial management are rarely carried out.

To sum up, enrollment management is carried out at private universities. Some national universities are trying to catch up but lack the freedom to manage enrollment.

4) *Student Affairs support*: This includes conducting student satisfaction surveys, management of the quality of residential life, analyses of diversity and the campus environment, and research of athletics performance.

Student satisfaction surveys are conducted in some form in most Japanese universities. Managing the quality of students' residential life has been a student affairs issue for some time. Although student surveys are not necessarily linked to university decision making, and managing the quality of residential life is not necessarily based on thorough surveys, it can be said that they are carried out both at private and national universities. Emphasis on diversity and athletics are unique to US universities, and do not apply to Japanese universities.

Analyses 1 to 4 are summarized in table 1. It can be said that national universities do not provide any institutional research services, whereas private universities do conduct institutional research to a certain degree which is directly linked to university decision making.

TABLE I. INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH SERVICES PERFORMED AT JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

Services of IR offices	National University	Private University
1) Academic Affairs support	—	—
2) Business/Finance support	—	“Gakkou-Houjin” (governing body)
3) Enrollment management	(Admissions Office)	Admissions Office
4) Student Affairs support	(Student Affairs Section, Center for Teaching and Learning)	

a. Names in the table denote the offices in charge of the respective institutional research function.

b. Brackets denote services not necessarily linked to university decision making but rather performed as routine procedural work.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Why does institutional research not function in Japanese national universities?

The differences between Japanese and US institutional research were examined in section II.

It was shown that institutional research in Japanese universities is only weakly linked to university decision making, that institutional research offices do not report to administrators of highest ranking such as the president or provost, and that there is little analysis or projection work

carried out at any administrative unit across the university. Private universities conduct business and financial management and enrollment management accompanied with institutional research, but there is no such activity in national universities.

It should be stressed, however, that the malfunctioning of institutional research offices at national universities is not the result of neglect of institutional research. Rather, the scarcity of institutional research is attributed to the fact that there are few practices in regular institutional management at the central administration. Although academic affairs, business and finances, and enrollment management are fundamental to university management, and have to be revisited regularly to control and keep the university in shape, they are not common procedure at national universities because of their history and their limited freedom to make changes. How can institutional research offices function in a university where there is no regular institutional management and correspondingly no provost responsible for internal university management and academic affairs to whom such offices could report?

There are several studies which discusses why institutional research does not function well in Japanese universities [3, 16, 23, 24]. Many refer to the fact that institutional research in Japan is still in its infancy compared to the United States with already a half of century history, and suggest that it will take some time until the institutional research function gains recognition within the university and the administration starts relying on it. Many refer also to the unique decision making structure in Japanese universities which is decentralized in two aspects. First, the decision making in Japanese universities generally takes place at the departmental level. Faculty hiring and promotion, the setting of admission, curriculum, and diploma policies, the intake of students are all basically set by departments, and the central administration has no influence to those decisions, or has only authority to approve them on a formal basis. Second, even the central administration is decentralized into administrative units such as finance, enrollment, research administration, presidential initiatives, etc. and there is little collaboration between units. To this end, university-wide policies are merely an aggregation of departmental and administrative unit policies.

These studies usually suggest establishing a “Japanese-style institutional research”, as US-style institutional research does not seem to function well in Japanese universities. Some propose Japanese institutional research offices serve departments rather than the central administration, or to spread out institutional research functions across various administrative units and departments [3, 24]. Some propose relying more on the potential of the excellent Japanese university staff, and have institutional research throughout the university on an individual basis [2]. Similar arguments can be seen also for US institutional research offices. Some studies point out that institutional research is conducted at diverse places, and suggest that institutional research may be more effective when carried out in university units where needed [12, 19]. However, it should be added that there is a fundamental

difference between universities in the United States and Japan. In the case of the United States, there is an established central institutional research function, and studies suggest the expansion of such institutional research functions across other units, whereas in Japan's case, a decentralized institutional research function is suggested because a central institutional research unit is not able to function.

The idea of "Japanese-style institutional research"—that is to deploy institutional research functions across the university wherever decision making takes place—may be an idea worth considering. If decision making takes place mainly in departments or administrative units, and if the ultimate goal of institutional research is to support "evidence-based" decision making, then, it is better for institutional research to be located within those units. But as Torii points out: "*in a decentralized university management there is the risk that educational improvements are confined to local optimum at departmental level*" [25]. Universities are responsible for decisions taken and action followed within the university as an autonomous and self-governing body, and it should be stressed that it is not desirable to leave decision making within the university decentralized.

As such, the idea of "Japanese-style institutional research" in the form of assisting decentralized decision making should be viewed as a transient model. It is more desirable that central administration sets university-wide policies, and institutional research offices support central decision making in the first place.

B. Proposals for institutional research offices especially at Japanese national universities

The key issue is not that institutional research offices do not function well in Japanese universities. Rather, the fact that regular institutional management does not seem to be taking place, especially in Japanese national universities, should be questioned. Whether it be academic affairs, business and finances, enrollment management, or student affairs, these are core to university management, and they have to be managed regularly and responsibly in an autonomous and self-governing university. In the case of Japanese national universities, the central administration still seems not to be aware of the need and urgency for university management. National universities were always fortunate to have more stable financial conditions than their private peers. It was also only in the last decade that national universities gained autonomous status and were placed in the position of having to self-manage.

Will regular and routine institutional management step in also for Japanese national universities? Almost a decade has passed since the incorporation of national universities, but there is little sign of it. It is difficult to see how they can progress in the future without loosening current tight regulation of tuition fees, faculty salaries, number of students and faculty members, and composition of departments. In addition, the major Japanese national universities—the seven former imperial universities—are not in such a critical situation as other universities, and will implement regular university management only slowly. However, these are the same universities having to face severe international

competition through the process of globalization in higher education. If they are not able to offer internationally competitive salaries or financial aid, it will become more and more difficult for them to recruit and retain excellent faculty members or students. If they are not able to adjust the academic fields they cover to current needs, and if they are not able to exercise agile management, it will become increasingly difficult for them to retain their position as internationally attractive universities. There are some discussions in progress to relax the regulation for national universities, and we can only hope that these will bear fruit.

Instead of dealing with regular institutional management issues, university administration at the major Japanese national universities right now seems to be concerned with daily troubleshooting or special initiatives such as university internationalization, educational reform, setting up multi-disciplinary research centers, and so on. Considering that central decision making is taking place not in regular institutional management but in strategic planning areas, the mission of Japanese institutional research offices at this time might be to support the administration in such strategic planning, rather than regular institutional management. Strategic planning is recently emphasized also in US universities, and institutional research offices are asked to support the planning process through various irregular information analyses also in the United States [1, 14]. However, it should be added that supporting such special initiatives is one of the most advanced levels of institutional research. Institutional research draws its recommendations from comparison between universities or projection from the past to future, which works only when the conditions across universities or in the past and the present can be assumed to be similar for the purposes of the comparison.

Nevertheless, it is important for institutional research offices to gain experience in supporting central administration decision making. This way, institutional research offices will be able to influence central decision making, and gradually gain recognition and trust from the administration. This will also give institutional research offices the chance to learn about university-wide issues, and to be prepared with data and analysis for when future issues arise. To work first on strategic issues and gradually work towards regular institutional issues is the reverse of how institutional research evolved in the United States. But under circumstances of a rapidly changing world, and at times where there is a pressing need for agile university management, this may be the most suitable way for institutional research to function in Japanese universities. After all, institutional researcher's roles are dynamic, and it is expected that institutional researchers work as agents of change, advocating and leading the university through transformation [9, 10].

To conclude, it may be the right tactics for Japanese institutional research offices at this time, to work first in the area of strategic planning support, gain influence with the central administration, and then gradually advocating to administrators the need to install regular institutional management and also showing how to deal with such management. This tactic might also work for countries

where universities were traditionally managed in collegiate fashion, but where the waves of marketization of higher education has reached, and where universities have started to work aggressively towards centralized management.

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