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## The New Quality Assurance System for Japanese Higher Education : Its social background, tasks and future

日本の高等教育の新しい質的保証制度  
—社会的背景・課題・将来—

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# The New Quality Assurance System for Japanese Higher Education : Its social background, tasks and future

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## Introduction

A new quality assessment system for higher education institutions has evolved in Japan. The university evaluation scheme by *National Institution for Academic Degrees (NIAD)*, introduced in 2000, is unique among East Asian countries, as it rather closely resembles systems that are currently in use in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and other northern European countries. Except for in those countries and regions with experiences of British colonisation, the European style of quality assessment is not common among Asian countries. As is the case in most Asian countries, and particularly in the years following the Second World War, the Japanese academic world has been strongly influenced by the United States. The American accreditation system is well known and has been adopted by many countries including Japan, although actual implementation in Asian countries often reflects slight adaptations of the original American model.

The administrative organisations of Japanese national universities exhibit characteristics similar to those of continental European universities. At the same time, Japanese higher education is well known for its hierarchical structure and highly selective procedures based on the academic achievement of individual student. In addition to this, Japan and Korea have developed large private sectors, and other East Asian and South East Asian countries also have experienced the rapid expansion of private higher education over the last two decades.

Having already had a rather fragmented structure when *NIAD* started its evaluation scheme, quality assurance in Japanese higher education has a very complex context. At the same time, the quality assessment system is faced with radical changes in the national university system itself. In order to know the current tasks and future of the new quality assessment system, the social context of Japanese higher education, the organisational structure of the assessment agency, and the design and process of evaluation have to be well examined.

In this paper, I will consider 1) the social background of the establishment of the *Directorate for University Evaluation* at NIAD in the fragmented context of quality assurance in Japa-

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nese higher education; 2) the basic design of the new quality assurance system, including ‘thematic evaluation’ and the principle of ‘evaluation according to aims and objectives’; and finally, 3) the possible impact of the emergence of a pluralistic and competitive higher education environment on university evaluation activities.

## 1. Fragmented Structure

The quality assurance system before 2000 had already exhibited rather fragmented characteristics, including: 1) authorisation and supervision by the government; 2) accreditation by the *Japan University Accreditation Association* (JUAA); 3) self-monitoring and self-evaluation by respective institutions; and 4) accreditation by various professional organisations. This fragmentation was further compounded in 2000 by the introduction of a ‘third party’ evaluation scheme.

### (1) Authorisation and supervision

According to the legal framework of higher education in Japan, the responsibility of quality assurance in higher education lies primarily with the national government, especially the *Ministry of Education and Science* (MEXT). The establishment of schools and programmes of local public or private institutions requires authorisation by MEXT. Assessment by the *Council for University Establishment* existing within MEXT assures the quality of newly established institutions, while national universities are founded and operated by MEXT itself. The Ministry supervises new institutions’ activities for several years following their establishment. However, quality assurance in higher education in Japan is basically entrusted to the autonomous efforts of the institutions themselves, excepting occasional visits by MEXT inspectors.

Adding to legal authorisation from the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT), some other ministries also maintain their own systems of authorisation for courses leading to professional qualifications in particular fields, such as medicine or architecture. Such procedures also contribute to quality assurance of related courses.

### (2) Accreditation by the JUAA

The *Japan University Accreditation Association* (JUAA) was established just after the Second World War, following the model of regional accreditation associations in the United States. Initially, the JUAA differed from American accreditation associations in that its accreditation was directly linked to authorisation by the Ministry of Education. However, since the Ministry of Education established its own authorisation procedure in 1956, JUAA has emphasised its role as a voluntary association of the member universities (Baba & Hayata,

1997 ; Shimizu, Baba & Shimada, 2000).

Unlike the American regional accreditation system, membership in the JUAA is not recognised as an essential requirement for the operation of a university in Japan. As all of the universities are authorised by the Ministry, even non-member institutions have been able to make use of credit exchange and student grant and loan systems. In the US, the students of institutions without accreditation membership can not get grants and scholarship, and credits and degrees that are exchangeable with other institutions. As participation in JUAA carries only an honorary status, only one third of the universities in Japan have full membership. JUAA has made efforts to revitalise itself especially since the 1990s, issuing the *Reform Report* in 2000 and revising its accreditation system in 1994, and again in 2002 (Ohnami, 2001).

Membership in JUAA is currently limited to four-year universities. As for junior colleges, the *Japan Association for Promotion of Junior Colleges* has quite recently started an accreditation programme.

### (3) *Self-monitoring and self-evaluation*

As a result of a long discussion that began in the mid 1970s, the Japanese government in 1991 decided to deregulate standards for the establishment of universities based on the strong belief in market competition among institutions. At the same time, the *University Council*, an advisory board to the Minister of Education, required universities to apply themselves to the processes of self-monitoring and self-evaluation, in order to maintain and improve the quality of university education (Kitamura, 1997). However, in its 1991 report the Council did not recommend the immediate introduction of an external assessment system as had already existed in some European countries, based on the discussion of academic freedom and autonomy. Following the American model, the Council expected JUAA to perform some kind of external assessment in the future (University Council, 1991 ; Yonezawa, 2002).

### (4) *Accreditation by professional organisations*

The widely adopted activities of self-monitoring and self-evaluation have changed the management styles of universities to some extent. However, the long economic recession referred to as ‘the lost decade’ following the prosperous period of Japanese ‘bubble’ economy of the 1980s encouraged an introspective of sorts on behalf of the Japanese, including a reconsideration of their social identity. Moreover, the increasing deference to ‘global standard’ concepts strongly influenced the idea of quality assurance in university education and research. A good example of this is the establishment of the *Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education* (JABEE) in 1999. JABEE aims to offer Japanese university graduates an

international qualification as professional engineers comparable with that of ABET in the United States (Yonezawa, 2002).

(5) *The ‘third party’ evaluation scheme*

In 1998, the University Council issued a major new report entitled, “A Vision for Universities in the 21st Century and Reform Measures”. This report acknowledged the positive impact of self-evaluation and monitoring on the reformation of university activities and procedures. However, the report also pointed out the necessity of ‘*third-party*’ (external) evaluation, and recommended the establishment of a national organisation to oversee the process.

The University Council further advocated that future university reforms be based on the following four basic concepts :

- a) The qualitative enhancement of education and research with the aim of cultivating students’ ability to pursue one’s own goals ;
- b) More flexible education and research systems to secure the university autonomy ;
- c) The improvement of administrative structures in higher education institutions so as to facilitate responsible decision-making and implementation ; and
- d) The diversification of universities and continuous improvement of education and research by establishing a multiple evaluation system. (Note : Systems permitting multiple evaluation agencies or organisations was regarded as an essential factor) (University Council, 1998).

The *Council for Science and Technology* (CST), an advisory board to the Prime Minister, echoed the call for a ‘third-party’ evaluation system in its report, “Measures for the Strategic Promotion of Information Science and Technology Pioneering the Future” in June 1999 (Council for Science and Technology, 1999).

## 2 . The New Quality Assurance Scheme and NIAD

A specially assembled preparatory committee designed the new quality assurance scheme. The following section considers : 1) the initial plan by the preparatory committee ; 2) the organisational structure of the new NIAD ; 3) the outline of the evaluation programmes ; 4) the procedure, and 5) the research and information services.

(1) *Preparatory committee*

Following University Council recommendations, a preparatory committee, the ‘National Organisation for University Evaluation’ was established. The committee issued its report in

February 2000, defining the two main purposes of third-party evaluation as *improvement* and *accountability*. Third-party evaluation activities were recognized as important in providing feedback to each university for the improvement of education and research. Furthermore, these activities would be a device to publicise information on the activities and outcomes of the institutions, which would in turn lead to broader public understanding and support of higher education institutions (Preparatory Committee for Funding a National Organisation for University Evaluation, 2000). The committee also stressed that third-party evaluation should involve specialists in evaluation procedures, as well as that required information be disseminated to both the public and the universities themselves.

Importantly, this evaluation function is also recognised as a part of assessment of the administrative procedures of the Ministry itself. All Ministry activities are to be assessed by the Ministry of General Affairs. Apparently, the activities of universities cannot be understood only from an administrative point of view. Therefore, one of the expected functions of this new institution specialised in university evaluation is to protect the value of national universities from direct external assessment by the central government.

## (2) *Organisational change of NIAD*

In April 2000, in response to a suggestion by the University Council, a new directorate for university evaluation was established at the *National Institution for Academic Degrees* (NIAD). In addition to its original degree-conferring functions, NIAD serves higher education institutions in matters concerning academic quality. However, under fiscal constraints, the eventual result was the reorganisation of NIAD, whereby NIAD keeps its original status equivalent to a national inter-university research institute, administered with the assistance of members of higher education institutions and other research organisations.

NIAD is expected to undertake evaluation activities independently from the government. In addition to its original degree-conferring function, it undertakes three tasks: 1) university evaluation; 2) research on university evaluation and quality assessment, and 3) collection, analysis, and dissemination of data regarding university evaluation.

Following University Council recommendations, the main purpose of university evaluation by NIAD is set as improving institutional activities through the assessment procedure, and fostering accountability through the sharing of information concerning conditions and outcomes of university activities. In order to avoid excessive standardisation of characteristics among respective institutions, the multi-faceted nature of the assessment procedure is emphasised. At the moment, only national universities are required to join the NIAD assessment scheme since national universities are operated mainly with public funds. Theoretically, there is a possibility that both private and public institutions will make use of the NIAD sys-

tem in the future. As a result of recent parliamentary debate, however, the Japanese government has decided that NIAD will not become engaged in the assessment of private universities ‘for the meanwhile’. As for junior colleges, how to implement their third-party evaluation is still under discussion.

### *(3) Evaluation programmes*

NIAD considers quality assurance an autonomous task for higher education institutions. Each institution is therefore expected to set its own goals in education, research and social services, with external assessment being conducted based on those institutional missions. The evaluation programmes are divided into three types: thematic evaluation, evaluation of educational activities by academic field, and evaluation of research activities by academic field. In addition, national universities will be requested to submit annual reports to NIAD, to show the current status of their educational and research activities to the public.

#### A. Thematic evaluation

Thematic evaluation refers to evaluation based on specific themes relevant to the assessment of the whole university system in Japan. The themes are to be selected from various aspects of university activities, including education, research, administration and social services. The review and evaluation will be implemented from various perspectives, including international comparisons.

#### B. Evaluation of educational activities, by academic fields

The evaluation of educational activities will be implemented in respective academic fields on a five-year cycle. The mission statement is regarded as a key factor for the review, with improvement through reform emphasised. At the same time, the transparency (i.e. openness to public scrutiny) of educational activities is also an important purpose of this evaluation scheme.

The review process considers the following items: 1) purpose and goal of education; 2) contents and methods of education; 3) student support, educational outcomes, and achievement of goals; 4) social service, association and exchange relationships, and 5) system in place for improving and reforming the quality of education.

#### C. Evaluation of research activities by academic field

The evaluation of research activities is to be undertaken for each unit of academic discipline, such as undergraduate and/or graduate, university research institute, or inter-university research institute on a five-year cycle, again with assessment based on the stated

mission. Peer review of faculty research activities in each field assures a qualitative perspective. At the same time, assessment in an international context is highly important.

The following items will be considered during the review process: 1) the institution's founding purposes, and the purposes and goals of its research; 2) content and level of research; 3) contribution to society, economy or culture; 4) achievement of institution's founding purposes, and 5) systems for improving and reforming the quality of research, and for revitalizing research activities.

#### D. Annual review of national universities

From the academic years 2001-2002 or 2002-2003, national universities will be requested to issue annual reports to demonstrate, as well as enhance their accountability. These annual reports will contain information on the status of education and research, to be collected and analysed by NIAD.

##### *(1) The Procedure*

The procedure of evaluation, basically is as follows: The *Committee for University Evaluation* (CUE) of NIAD decides the policies and procedures to be reviewed. The universities then submit their self-evaluation reports to the CUE. Based on the self-evaluation reports and other data collected by NIAD itself, CUE organises site visits or interviews by committee members and other experts involved. In the process of collecting and analysing data, the use of electronic media and online networks are highly recommended. After deliberations on all available data, including peer review, a preliminary evaluation will be prepared, with notification given to the university concerned prior to finalising a report. Members of reviewed institutions or programmes will be provided with an opportunity to express opinions in response to the tentative report. Based on these opinions, CUE will reconsider the initial report and compose a final evaluation, to be issued together with the opinions offered by the evaluated universities. Special attention will be given to maintaining transparency throughout the evaluation process.

##### *(2) Research and information services*

In order to support the evaluation programmes, NIAD set as its main tasks the research of the university evaluation system and methods and the collection, analyses and dissemination of information concerning higher education institutions and programmes. Adding to its committees and secretariat bureau, NIAD established within its organization the 'Faculty of University Evaluation and Research'. This faculty is comprised of three divisions: the 'Evaluation System Division', the 'Education and Research Evaluation Division', and the

‘Evaluation Information Division’.

The Evaluation System Division undertakes research on effective criteria, contents, methods and management of evaluation. It also conducts surveys of university evaluations performed by various evaluation organisations in Japan and overseas. The division will also be involved in the publication of protocol for the evaluation.

The Education and Research Evaluation Division consists of senior academic staffs that have experience with academic reviews in various disciplines. This division conducts surveys and research toward more effective education and research evaluation systems for each discipline. Those staff members are expected to participate in the subcommittees of each academic discipline as specialists.

The Evaluation Information Division takes charge of the research and development of the database system essential for collecting, analysing, and disseminating the information concerning the outcome of evaluations. The documents and data will be collected based on the results of the division’s research.

As the development of the assessment system and methods has been quite rapid, the evaluation system should be flexible and allowed to be developed further. The research work within NIAD will be a key element in protecting academic values, and at the same time, in developing the evaluation system in a formative way.

### 3 . Initial Impact and Future

The preparatory committee suggested the necessity to implement a pilot scheme before implementing the full evaluation system from April 2003. At the same time, the first annual review of national universities should be undertaken in 2001.

NIAD has already issued the agenda for the pilot, selecting two themes for the thematic review: 1) contribution to society through educational services, and 2) liberal arts education. All of the 99 national universities and 14 inter-university national institutions will submit requested information and self-study reports for these topics. NIAD also chose two fields, namely, natural sciences and medical sciences for pilot evaluation of education and research activities. Six institutions were selected for the evaluation of educational activities, and six other institutions were selected for the evaluation of research in each field.

The detailed protocols for these programmes were published in the beginning of 2001. The pilot scheme will contribute information leading to the full implementation of the evaluation scheme. During these procedures, NIAD has requested input from related organisations, such as the *Japan Association of National Universities* (JANU) and JUAA.

The most important possible impact of NIAD will be that it will provide information on higher education at national, institutional and programme levels. It will also help each insti-

tution or program to clarify its mission and objectives. NIAD also has the possibility to promote distinction among institutions. Some researchers have criticised that this kind of trial will lead to a NIAD ‘monopoly’ on the production of information, and furthermore that excessive collection of the data may also add bureaucratic workloads to the daily academic activities of researchers. Conversely, however, the NIAD system will create a large database on Japanese higher education, which can be utilised by all of the parties concerned. This situation will, at least, energise the discussion on higher education in Japan.

Another criticism is directed to the government’s intention to utilise assessment results in determining financial allocations among national universities. The precise procedure for how this will occur remains unclear. However, the interim report, ‘On The Image of New “National University Corporation”’ published by MEXT in September 2001 reasserted its intention to base financial allocations on the results of evaluation (MEXT, 2001). In Japan, the government is planning to change the current national university system into an independent administrative corporation system starting in 2004. According to this scheme, all of the public service organisations including the national university system are expected to accept third-party (external) assessment. At the same time, the Ministry of Education is aiming to make use of the results of quality assessments for financial allocation among the national universities.

In the report, MEXT further suggested its plan to establish a ‘National University Evaluation Committee’. As for quality assessment in education and research, the Committee will entrust its implementation to NIAD as an expert agency. The current NIAD quality assessment system itself is not designed for the purpose of determining financial allocation, but rather to assess university activities based on aims and goals set by the universities themselves. The report also pointed out the necessity that the government revise the evaluation scheme of NIAD. It is readily apparent that this kind of linkage between evaluation and finance can easily become an obstacle to formative assessment and improvement. For example, the ‘Top 30 plan’ stated by MEXT in 2001 calling for concentrated financial investment in a limited number of excellent research units is drawing severe criticism by the academia. Careful discussion of the linkage between evaluation and financial allocation is essential if there are to be positive incentives for university participation and for the scheme to be a core element of Japanese higher education.

Finally, we would do well to direct our attention to the introduction of review in an international comparative context. In the field of natural sciences, medical sciences and engineering, there is a particularly keen demand to publicise research activities overseas. We have to remember, however, that excessive competition may not always lead to success in academic activities, and that excessive orientation to research work may deteriorate educational cir-

cumstances. Nevertheless, the analyses and dissemination of this kind of information will present a strong incentive for further, positive development of research activities in Japan.

In light of the fragmented structure of the quality assurance system in Japan, it will be much more difficult to perceive a clear impact compared with that observed in the United Kingdom and other northern European countries. At the same time, as currently implemented the cost of assessment could easily pose a major problem because of its multiple, and sometimes redundant assessment structure. Radical innovation in data collection methods, including the widespread usage of information technology is required; collaboration among different quality assessment schemes is also indispensable. Any effective quality assessment scheme also demands that universities actively embrace and involve themselves in the evaluation process. The stress of accountability and overwork that often accompanies evaluation can contribute to the ineffectiveness of a quality assessment system, which in turn renders universities reluctant to become involved in the process. Japan has a highly complex higher education system; a quality assessment system must reflect a recognition of this fact, and be equally innovative in order to be effective and worth pursuing.

Note : This paper is based primarily on a presentation given by Akira Tachi and Akiyoshi Yonezawa at the 6th Biennial Conference of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, held in Bangalore, India, 2001.

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## [ABSTRACT]

### The New Quality Assurance System for Japanese Higher Education : Its social background, tasks and future

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*This paper aims to clarify the purposes and functions of the new quality assurance system now being implemented in Japan. In April 2000, a new Directorate for University Evaluation was established at the National Institution for Academic Degrees (NIAD), a body that serves higher education institutions in matters concerning academic quality. At the same time, NIAD is not the only institution involved in quality assurance activities. In this paper, the author discusses : 1) the social background of the establishment of the Directorate for University Evaluation at NIAD in the fragmented context of quality assurance in Japanese higher education ; 2) the basic design of the new quality assurance system, including ‘thematic evaluation’ and the principle of ‘evaluation according to aims and objectives’ ; and finally 3) the possible impact of the emergence of a pluralistic and competitive higher education environment on university evaluation activities.*

## 要旨

本稿は現在日本において実施されつつある新しい品質保証システムの目的と機能を明らかにすることを目的としている。2000年4月、大学評価・学位授与機構が発足した。同時に、機構は品質保証の活動に関わる唯一の機関というわけではない。本稿では、著者は以下のことを議論する。すなわち、①日本の高等教育における品質保証のフラグメンテッドな文脈における大学評価・学位授与機構発足の社会的背景、②新しい品質保証システムの基本デザイン（「テーマ別評価」と「目的・目標に即した評価」を含む、最後に③複式かつ競争的な高等教育環境が出現することの大学評価活動へのインパクトである。

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