
Opinion & Perspective

Struggles for Autonomy in Japanese Higher Education

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This article examines three areas of reform in Japanese higher education currently underway that purport to deliver autonomy in different ways. Real reform necessarily entails improving an unsatisfactory situation, so I use reform here to mean more than simply “amend.”

Since former Prime Minister Nakasone’s government formed the Ad Hoc Council on Educational Reform (*Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai*) in the 1980s, higher education reforms have accelerated in Japan. Following the Ad Hoc Council’s recommendation, the Ministry of Education established the University Council (*Daigaku Shingikai*) in 1986. The University Council (UC) is an advisory group of experts including representatives from labor and industry. The UC has promoted policies designed to liberalize higher education in Japan and published at least 25 reports between 1987 and 2000 (Tsuruta, 2003). All of this activity is very impressive; however, the fundamental philosophical tenets supporting expansionist centralized bureaucratic control rarely are questioned by authorities. This could handicap efforts to achieve much needed reforms in Japanese higher education.

My focus in this article is on three reform trends that are being currently invoked as indicators of increased autonomy in Japanese

higher education: reform of the national universities (*kyoiku kaikaku*), faculty development (FD), and learner autonomy. I examine these through the prism of my own experience teaching at a Japanese national university, as well as serving on a number of committees there. I held a tenured post at that institution for four years and have since left. My perspective is admittedly subjective and highly selective, but it is informed. I explore each of the three reform currents through reflection on the relevant literature in tandem with autobiographical descriptions of my own experience with them.

Reform of the national universities

In the deliberations to ratify the National University Corporations Law, Ministry of Education officials claimed that the national universities were being reformed in order to increase their autonomy (see **Bachnik**, 2005, p. 284). This would seem to indicate that the government views the public universities' dependent relationship on the ministry as a defect in the system. McVeigh is of the opinion, however, that "tacit in much of the discourse about reform is an understanding that any change should be authorized... by the Ministry" (2005, p. 78). This observation could be used to legitimate the claim of many observers that: "The reforms are likely to make universities, especially middle-ranking ones, more dependent than independent" (Cyranski, 2002, p. 876), and will likely threaten the existence of smaller institutions in remote areas (Jannuzi, 2008).

The National University Corporations Law gave public university presidents increased authority, thus establishing more of a corporate style of management with an increased concentration of power at the top. Some observers fear that the reforms could result in creating institutions that are "little better than 'education-ministry-run universities'" (Tabata, 2005, p. 97). As a possible foreshadowing of this, in January 2008 the Ministry of Education announced plans to set "minimum knowledge and techniques requirements" for all

undergraduate programs (“Education ministry to create university guidelines,” 2008).

But perhaps this is an overblown concern. As Tabata (2005) notes, “it is not unrealistic to assume that actual conditions relating to university administration will remain much the same. In fact, many members of universities feel that no drastic changes will occur” (p. 101). Hatakenaka (2005) expands on this point:

Today’s process of incorporation ... may turn out to create little more than structures which will continue to constrain university actions. There may be large numbers of changes in names and appearances but the fundamental relationships may not change much. (p. 71)

Thus, it remains to be seen what the new status of the former public universities as “independent administrative corporations” will mean on a pragmatic level. According to the legislation, the Ministry of Education is in charge of organizing the planning and evaluation of universities, leaving the actual implementation of plans up to the newly “independent” public schools. With the state stipulating the goals of the evaluation and actually responsible for the evaluation, fears of this being a Trojan horse aimed at increased central control do not seem unwarranted. After all, the guarantee of professional educational autonomy granted in the Fundamental Law of Education has been constantly eroded by Japanese officials (Horio, 1988, pp. 162-167).

I have heard faculty speculate that the plan is merely an effort to save money and give academia in Japan a sharper commercial focus. According to Nobel laureate Ryoji Noyori, the reform plan “should aim for energizing researchers and educators, not producing some financial result” (Cyranoski, 2002, p. 875). This speaks to concerns raised by my colleagues that the reforms will simply lower all boats (i.e., cut

benefits for Japanese and non-Japanese faculty alike) through cost-saving measures such as limited-term contracts for faculty members and staff, thus creating a kind of professional class of academic *freeters* (a term used in Japan to describe underemployed young adults).

The current reform process seems paradoxical. One of the espoused aims of the reform policy is to improve the quality of Japanese higher education by creating **distinctive, world-class academic institutions**. However, the origin of the current reform process was the campaign to cut public sector personnel costs. In order to reach the goal for a 25% reduction to the civil service workforce between 2001 and 2010, the government included the national universities in the calculation (Hatakenaka, 2005; Jannuzi, 2008). Former Prime Minister Koizumi pushed ahead and incorporated the public universities. This sleight of **hand instantly helped the government cut the civil service rolls**. With the focus firmly on the bottom line, public university presidents now have the authority to trim expenses by consolidating and cutting personnel. But for Japanese universities to gain the ability to compete internationally, a key objective of the reforms, the national government will need to spend much more of its gross national income on higher education (Murasawa, 2002), **that is unless the government opts to pass that burden onto students through large increases in tuition fees**. Indeed, **this is the future according to Jannuzi: "Reduced annual bloc grants to the former national and public universities will most likely lead to a rise in fees closer to the level of private ones - from around [US]\$4,500 now to [US]\$7,500 in the next five years."**

Changes are taking place (see Eades, Goodman, & Hada, 2005), but the rationale for the reforms appears muddled and the outlook for greater autonomy at the national universities is uncertain. For the reforms to succeed on an educational level, workable procedures are needed to evaluate and improve research and teaching, **and this brings me to my next point**.

Faculty development (FD)

To promote the goal of improving the quality of university education in Japan, the government's University Council (UC) spotlighted three areas for attention: **reinforcement of teaching, promotion of research** and teaching of an international standard, and responding to the development of a lifelong learning society (Tsuruta, 2003). One of the stated objectives for the reinforcement of the teaching function is raising the standard of the faculty's teaching ability and morale through the introduction of **faculty development (FD)**. **As a result, "FD focusing** on improvement of the teaching ability and skill of faculty members has been institutionalised as a kind of obligation in every institution by the UC's recommendation" (Arimoto, 2001, p. 9). This reaction by university administrators begs the question: **for whose benefit is FD** being promoted in Japanese tertiary institutions?

The vast majority of faculty opposed the decision to transform the national universities into Semi-independent Administrative Agencies (Jannuzi, 2008). A likely result of this will be tepid faculty support for implementation of reforms. This tenuous commitment to change, coupled with the sudden obligatory implementation of FD programs on university campuses, suggests weak faculty support for innovations. Since reliability and trust are the main determinants of the effectiveness of university governance, faculty inclusion in governance processes is essential. In the absence of clearly laid out, mutually agreed-upon goals, the stakeholders in the process may very well be working at cross-purposes.

My experience with faculty development extends nearly 20 years. I served on an FD committee at my previous institution, a national university, for two years. What I experienced was reluctant committee members kept busy observing resistant colleagues and video taping lessons. At the departmental level, tapes were given fast forward reviews by colleagues who hastily filled out and submitted evaluation forms. Committee members compiled reports each term and all of

this information was sent to the committee chair. To me at the time, this activity seemed earnest and it required a good deal of time, effort and care. One year after I had vacated my seat on the FD committee though, I began receiving disturbing messages from the colleague who replaced me. She asked if I knew who in our department had been observed, when, and what kind of observation (video tape or in class) they had opted for. She later asked if I had copies of the evaluations on file. In short, all of the work we had done for two years was lost. It had not counted for anything. This disturbing perception was reinforced by the fact that after the frenzy of the first two years when FD was in vogue, the buzz about FD in our general and departmental faculty meetings completely died.

There is rarely talk amongst faculty about what it is they do in the classroom, and about why or how they would like to improve or change their pedagogy (Bok, 2006). This is unfortunate for many reasons, one of which is that it creates a vacuum wherein faculty members abandon their central responsibility, thus allowing administrators to move in and take control. The newly implemented student evaluations at Japanese public universities present this kind of opening. To date, at my former campus, evaluation results are largely ignored by administrators, faculty and students. But complacency amongst professors might not be wise for maintaining their autonomy in the classroom over the long term. A serious effort at improving teaching would obviously mine these data sources systematically in order to give professors meaningful guidance. Colleagues need to work together and help one another. Simply put, there is very little practical FD support for faculty members who need or seek mentoring (Cowie, 2002). This situation mirrors the lack of Information Technology services provided at many Japanese universities (see Bachnik, 2005, p. 283). For FD to be meaningful, it has to promote *teacher autonomy*.

Learner autonomy

Another term linked to reform heard in Japanese academia today is *learner autonomy*. Clearly, autonomy is a motherhood issue. But can its broad and seldom challenged appeal actually weaken sincere implementation efforts? Concern has been raised recently that the theoretical underpinnings of learner and teacher autonomy might not hold and will give way to yet another pedagogical innovation (Little, 2007, p. 1). In the same vein, Nakata (2007, p. 11) **paraphrases Dewey** (1938) to implore that: “Learner autonomy must be a reality, not a name or slogan.”

During work on a government-funded research project that I was asked to join and that **focused on promoting learner autonomy**, I became frustrated because it was unclear how ‘learner autonomy’ would ultimately be fostered in the university. My fear was that my former university would adopt a prescriptionist ideology of teacher control in deciding what is good for learners to guide autonomous learning pedagogy. A nagging difficulty with this orientation is that while students (the Other) may be seen as problematic, the teacher (Self) is viewed neutrally or as unproblematic (Holliday, 2003). Teachers’ habits, perceptions, goals and methods need to be reflected upon and challenged in constructive ways. My frustration grew as I sensed that colleagues at my former institution had no intention to explore their teaching practice in order to grow themselves as autonomous learners.

When the final reports were written and the presentations were made at the end of the project, most of the findings and recommendations favored technical elements to make students in the General English courses more “autonomous.” To me, repackaging data collection procedures via computerized testing systems should not be labeled as a process to promote learner autonomy. This leads at best to an uninspired program for promoting autonomous learning. But this outcome was

understandable since it pleased top-ranking administrators.

My experience has revealed that even though the term *learner autonomy* is being flaunted in Japanese higher education, the focus on students can be overwhelmed by a search for quick technological fixes with the lowest labor demands. There seems to be money available for more machines and software, but not for teachers. I stressed to my colleagues on the research project that human relations are at the core of successful autonomy promotion. Classroom interaction is vital because: "Whether or not students will *show* autonomous behaviour to their teachers is of course their decision, which is in itself a matter of personal autonomy" (Holliday, 2005, p. 87). What this means is that for the success of programs intent on fostering autonomous learning, the professional pedagogical development of individual teachers should focus on trying to close the gap between student and teacher perceptions of learning. If teacher and learner autonomy are interdependent, and teacher autonomy is "control over one's own professional development" (McGrath, 2000, p. 100), then to open the necessary space for students to exercise their autonomy, the teacher needs to recognize and assert her own autonomy (Breen & Mann, 1997). Just as the situation described above regarding faculty development (FD) shows, there appears to be little concern about providing sustained faculty support to enable the development of teaching practices to foster learner autonomy.

Holliday stresses the central role of this kind of support: "It is possible for educators to be learner-centred, in the same way as it is possible for men to be feminist; but this requires a particularly difficult depth of reconceptualization which cannot be captured in technicalized methodological procedures" (2005, p. 80). The creation of an educational environment that fosters learner, and teacher, autonomy in the more significant, deeper, and lifelong learning sense of the term, will likely entail, over a long period of development, the eventual creation of a learning culture of risk taking, experience

sharing, experimentation and an openness to change amongst faculty and students. Clearly an innovation like this must have the full support of administrators. Most importantly, teaching has to be publicly valued in the same ways that research is (see Stewart, 2004, 2006). This means that the intersection where teacher autonomy meets learner autonomy can be political in nature. The concept of autonomous learning demands significant changes that might be resisted by vested interests supporting hitherto 'standard procedures.'

More autonomy or more control?

There is a potential for more student-centered approaches to emerge, but the government's grip on education policy appears to be tightening ("Education ministry to create university guidelines," 2008). Demographic trends are forcing schools to lower entrance standards and take in a much broader spectrum of students. This might encourage some teachers to consider exploring their practice. The fear of losing students, and subsequently teaching posts, could possibly shift the perennial focus on research toward more of a concern with effective teaching. A major obstacle to this change is the fact that teaching is not valued in faculty appointments and promotions. Currently for most appointments, teaching skill is never considered. Promotion, in the humanities and social sciences, is simply a numbers game in which the only considerations appear to be likeability, age and number of publications. Even the quality of publications matters little for the most part (Eades, 2005). The lack of genuine processes for tenure and promotion remains highly problematic.

Faculty at the former national universities in Japan are now required to do self-evaluations of their performance in the areas of teaching, scholarship, administrative work and community service. Yet, just as with FD and pedagogy promoting learner autonomy, there is very little support for professional development. As a result, professors might try to cover up problems out of fear and shame. What seems to be

happening to the many new sets of evaluations now required at public institutions is that they are naturally absorbed into the elaborate system of status-based evaluation in Japan that loves to rank schools (Bachnik, 2005). Because all individual evaluations are tabulated into faculty- and university-wide statistics necessary for getting funding from the ministry, the individual becomes lost in the process, **with the real change** being a strengthening of the relationship between the ministry and the universities.

The underlying obstacle to real reform is conceptual. The centralized education bureaucracy in Japan frames education as an administrative function rather than as an academic enterprise (see Bachnik, 2005; Horio, 1988; McVeigh, 2005, 2006). Bachnik argues that the organizational structure of Japanese higher education must change in ways that “require a shift from a focus on education that is administrative, bureaucratic and teacher-centred; to one that is student-centred and focuses on the education process of the students” (p. 279). Therefore, until the notion of ‘education’ undergoes radical reframing, the gap between reform plans and practice will make substantial change difficult to implement. Japanese university administrators have to stop being forced to fix their appreciative gazes upward at Tokyo-based bureaucrats in order to maintain their funding and status, and must be allowed to look inward at students and faculty members on their campuses, as well as out toward their local communities; that is, more local autonomy and less central control.

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