

ACCREDITATION, CHANGE AND QUALITY IN JAPANESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and seeks to make sense of the concept of accreditation and quality in higher education institutions in Japan. What quality means, how it is measured, how it is interpreted by those involved, and whether it is a habit or an act will be discussed. As Japanese institutions of higher education are seeking to advance in the world rankings, global standards need to be established and ways of implementing them and accrediting institutions that achieve them, need to be explored. The paper provides a brief overview of the concept of quality in higher education in Japan and how it aligns with global standards. Based on longitudinal research of a Japanese university undergoing change associated with an accreditation procedure implemented by the *Japan University Accreditation Association*, the research will share findings of how individuals made sense of quality and accreditation. The paper concludes with observations on how managers can ensure quality and accreditation is successfully managed within their institution.

Key words: *accreditation, quality assurance, higher education management, Japan*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study sets out to develop further understanding of accreditation as it relates to higher education in Japan. There is an increased focus on issues of quality, national and international benchmarking and standards (Yonezawa, 2003, 2008; Eades in Goodman, 2005; Arimoto, 1997; Goodman, 2005) throughout the world. Many of the changes associated with accreditation are resulting in public universities behaving like private institutions. Japan already has a dual-structure higher education system (Yonezawa, 2003, 2007) where there are both private and public institutions operating in a situation where structures and processes, planning, leadership and implementation are all under new types of pressure to perform.

1.1. Context of Japan

A major societal effect on the changing face of higher education (HE) in Japan is the declining birthrate and aging population. A recent OECD report stated that by 2050 the population would have decreased by 25%. Traditionally, Japanese HE has been known for its large university participation rate; and this has led to a reassessment of the accreditation

and evaluation trends and reforms necessary. The biggest educational reform imposed by the government in HE in Japan was in 2004 when each of Japan's 87 national universities was given an independent corporation status. Although they are still part of the public sector, after 2004, they are expected to be independently managed. An extensive explanation of these reforms can be found in the reports compiled by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER).

A substantial amount of literature has focused on the decline in applicants to Japanese universities. Some universities have seen the number of their applicants declining by as much as 90% (Goodman, 2005). This is crucial for private universities because their income is heavily dependent on the student numbers with some facing financial collapse. Many administrators are attempting to move with this shift and find that when they start to implement accreditation or quality management procedures they are facing increasing pressure from educators within in their institution, whose mission is vocational not administrative. Despite the different views of utilizing private management practices in HE institutions in other parts of the world (Deem, 2001; Goldspink, 2007; Teichler, 2003), Japanese private universities are undoubtedly following 'managerial values' in the pursuit of success and accredited status (Teichler, 2003).

A discussion of Japan and improvement cannot ignore the concept of *Kaizen*. *Kaizen* is part of a change scenario of continuous change. It seeks continuous ongoing improvements and alignments in order to achieve success. Imai (1986) introduced the *Kaizen* approach to western managers and researchers, which was translated as 'continuous improvement' (Lillrank & Kanno, 1989). This resulted in a swell of research on the topic especially when it was connected to Total Quality Management (TQM) (Imai, 1986). The word derives from the two compounds *Kai*, which means 'to change', and *Zen*, which means to 'do good'. Thus, literally translated it means to continually change and make good. It is often used in Japanese in connection with the word *Kairyō*, which means 'process improvement.' As such, *Kaizen* is process orientated and if done correctly, it will improve standards. Imai argues that standards must be part of the process, as benchmarks and that there must be constant small changes. The PDCA cycle, which stands for *Plan, Do, Check and Act*, is a key part of the process. He also argues that in order for true *Kaizen* to be achieved, it must involve everyone in the organization. This whole approach to change will be seen in the next section, when the JUAA accreditation procedure is explained and an understanding of it here within the literature will help to contextualize the JUAA accreditation procedures.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality is particularly problematic to conceptualize and define, in both English and Japanese. Quality can be 'multi-faceted' as Frazer (1992)

defines, and 'slippery and value-laden' (Harvey & Green, 1993). Scott (1994) goes as far as to suggest that there is no authoritative definition of quality in higher education. Further review of literature (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2006) shows that we can view quality from a variety of perspectives; as a mechanism, as a form of excellence, as perfection, as a decision as to whether or not something is fit for purpose, as value for money, or as transformation. Initially, quality as a mechanism (Harvey & Newton, 2005) makes reference to the process of the assessment. There are three main mechanisms for measuring quality in HE institutions; assessment, audit and accreditation. Assessment is seen as a quantitative evaluation (Woodhouse, 1999). Audits focus on the processes that are implemented by HE institutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Dill, 2000). Accreditation is the method most utilized around the world. With many country models based on the United States accreditation models (Eaton, 2004). Essentially, the process of accreditation is a yes/no decision (Woodhouse, 1999).

Quality as a form of excellence is associated with standards, it has various connotations and can be related to such ideas as benchmarking, league tables, etc (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2006). The assurance is done through an external evaluation, such as an accreditation. If we look at quality as a fitness for purpose, we are asking if the university is fulfilling its mission. The accreditation association is defining standards. Finally, quality as transformation (Harvey & Knight, 1995) is when quality can develop or empower students through the learning process and when institutions can change to do better research or have wider access. The accreditation procedure is concerned with accountability and procedure. Thune (1996) states that accountability and improvement are mutually exclusive, but it is difficult to ascertain whether improvements can be gained through the process of accreditation. How can we measure improvements? Stensaker (2003) argues that, 'accountability v improvement' is a simplified view of change in higher education; that it is a cause and effect relationship and not on a continuum. One way of thinking about change in HE is by examining a particular context of HE (Baird, 1988; Fry, 1995; Nordvall & Braxton, 1996) and the quality of that context.

Both external and internal reviews of HE accreditation are covered. External reviews are those conducted by accreditation agents who write reports about what they have observed on visits to the university and the documents the university submitted. Internal reviews are reviews conducted by faculty members as they reflect on what they have been contributing to the institution and the institution as a whole. There are various arguments for and against such an approach. Harvey (2002) argues that reviews are a catalyst for improvement, as they can improve the relationship between the HE institution and the outside body. Thune (1996) argues that such an approach can increase internal and external credibility

and transparency. Yet the internal reviews can be susceptible to what DeVries (1997) terms as write-ups, when institutions write-up and embellish their review reports for the purpose of compliance. Having such internal reviews are also a great pressure on faculty members' time. Increased workload (Asking, 1997, Stephenson, 2004, Rasmussen, 1997) is a common complaint from faculty. Pressure to follow the rules can limit growth and innovation as institutions focus on meeting particular standards. The peer review strategy (Brennan, 1997) also utilized in Japan between different sections of the university can also lead to power imbalances between faculty and staff. Additional pressure can result in weakening relations between faculty and staff. The peer review strategy involves one group of the university (a faculty, department, research center or administrative section) observing another group and evaluating it. Institutions are judged via qualitative and quantitative methods. These equate to examining the difference between performance in numbers and performance on a more holistic basis. Additionally, faculty members also often express disillusionment over the way research and teaching is evaluated through the accreditation procedure and a feeling of 'distrust' and 'window dressing' can occur (Weijnen, 2007: p.132).

3. RESEARCH ON ACCREDITATION IN JAPAN

A great deal of literature has been produced about accreditation of HE institutions in Japan (Yonezawa, 2002; McVeigh 2001; Hood, 1983; Aoki, 2005; Clark, 2005), yet the majority of this work is in Japanese and inaccessible to a wider audience. Also, both Japanese and non-Japanese researchers have spent limited time examining the system. A number of researchers have looked at the problems in Japanese HE and attributed them to the lack of accountability and quality control present in the system as a whole (Cutts, 1997; Hall, 1995, 1998; McVeigh, 1997, 2001, 2002). Despite the fact that Japan has moved towards an audit-type culture in HE many researchers still disagree on the effectiveness of Japanese HE accreditation procedures (Goodman, 2001; Shore & Wright, 1999; Eades, 2000). The general discourse of research on accreditation in Japan can be confined to three points; descriptive accounts, research connected to internationalization and comparative studies. Japanese higher education systems have a 'dual sector structure' (Yonezawa, 2002). This refers to national and local, public and private institutions, which utilize two structures of evaluation and accreditation. Much research focuses on detailing these systems. For example, Yonezawa's (2002) research examines both systems; yet, his account is more descriptive and less of a critical approach. He ascertains that a structure similar to Europe is used in the public system, while the structure of the private system is more aligned to the American system of accreditation (Yonezawa, 2002). This duality therefore means that an analysis of these accreditation structures and wider societal issues associated with it, present particular problems. Not

only is there a clear division between private and public universities, but as Eades (2005) suggests, there are also two types of academic cultures that co-exist in Japanese HE. One culture can be likened to how academia is viewed in western countries, with 'world class' institutions engaging in internationally recognized research, while the second culture is a more localized culture that does not join the ranks of the 'world class' universities. These dualities lead to the second strand of research on accreditation in Japan, which focuses on internationalization. With the introduction of other evaluation mechanisms such as OECD rankings and the Japanese University Center of Excellence Programs (see Eades, 2005 for more detailed information), the results of such accreditations can often be conflicting and confusing to both potential students and faculty. This research tends to focus on the outcomes and competition between universities needed for institutions to be classified as 'global' institutions. The final strand of research is comparative studies. These studies examine how the Japanese system is similar or different to another system, such as work by Mulvey, Winskowski and Comer (2013).

3.1. The JUAA Accreditation Procedure

The accreditation of universities through the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) takes place every seven years. In Japanese, the word for accreditation – *ninsho* – is said to have two meanings: 1) to certify that something reaches a pre-defined standard, 2) to confirm that systems are run as they should be. This section will detail the accreditation procedure carried out by the JUAA. A board of trustees and a board of councilors run the JUAA, and there is a team of over 200 employees constantly engaged in accrediting universities. Directly under the command of the board are three committees: the university accreditation committee, the appeal committee and the accreditation planning committee. Each of these committees are directly involved with the university that is under the accreditation procedure. Directly under the control of the university accreditation committee are two university review sub-committees whose job it is to review all the documentation exchanges submitted between the university and the JUAA. There is also the financial affairs review sub-committee, which, due to the dual structure of higher education in Japan, is split into two panels, one for national/public universities and one for private universities. Also under the control of the accreditation committee is a progress report review sub-committee that is responsible for following up on the progress of the institutions after the accreditation procedure. There is a re-review sub-committee that is responsible for following up and reviewing universities that have failed some part of the accreditation, and who need to resubmit documentation for re-review and finally the supplementary review committee. The Self-study (self-evaluation) procedure of the process is deemed the most important. It follows a PDCA cycle; plan, do, check and act (Box. 1). During the planning stage, the

university is expected to establish their objectives and educational goals. They then formulate a medium-term plan. This includes the formulation of educational goals, diploma policy, organization and implementation policies for all educational goals. During the 'Do' process, the policies and practices are implemented. In the 'Check' process, the functioning of the educational system is verified, including students' progress and results. The evaluation by external people is also included at this stage. Finally, during the 'Act' stage, there is the formulation of improvement measures and the further implementation of these improvements. This process should continue to spiral throughout the life of the university, not just during the accreditation procedure itself. Through this process the university must satisfy ten standards set out by the JUA (www.jua.gov.jp) (Box. 2).

Box 1. PDCA Cycle

PLAN

- Are policies and goals appropriately specified?
- Is there a concrete action plan to realize such policies and goals?

- Is there a method to execute the action plan?
- Do the constituent members thoroughly share understanding of matters

DO

- Have concrete subordinate goals based on the plan been established?
- Has each of these subordinate goals been made clear at the organizational/individual level?
- Are steady activities being executed based on the subordinate goals?
- Are creative measures being implemented to motivate constituent members to achieve goals?

CHECK

- Are the checks and evaluations on the actual state of activities constantly being conducted?
- Are checks and evaluations being carried out based on objective data?
- Are creative measures being taken to increase the reliability and validity of reviews and assessments?

ACT

- Are policies and goals being reexamined based on the results of checks/evaluations, and are the improvement measures necessary for plans and methods being established?
- Are approximately organized analyses being conducted on whether the cause of problems lies in the plans/methods or in

the implementation of activities?

- Are problem areas and flaws that became clear based on reviews and assessments being dealt with appropriately?
- Have procedures and methods linked to reform and improvement of checks/evaluation results been specified?

Box 2: Ten Standards for Accreditation

[Mission and Goals] Universities must define appropriate goals based on their own mission for the objective of cultivation of human resources and other objectives in educational research, and must make them public.

[Educational and Research Structure] Universities must establish necessary structures to carry out educational and research activities based on their own missions and goals.

[Faculty Members and Faculty Structure] Universities must clarify the ideal image of faculty members and the policy for organizing faculty structures in order to realize their own missions and goals, and use these as a basis to develop their faculty structures.

[Educational Program, Instruction and Outcomes] Universities must specify educational objectives and use them as a basis to clarify their diploma policy and curriculum policy in order to realize their own missions and goals. Universities must also follow such policies to develop and enrich their educational programs and instructions to achieve sufficient educational outcomes, and confer degrees appropriately.

[Student Admissions] Universities must stipulate proper admission policies in order to admit students in a fair and correct manner in accordance with their own mission and goals.

[Student Services] Universities must provide satisfactory services for learning support, student support and career path support so that students can concentrate on their studies.

[Educational and Research Environment] Universities must develop and manage appropriately a learning environment and an educational and research environment that enables students to study and faculty members to carry out educational and research activities in a necessary and sufficient manner.

[Social Cooperation and Social Contribution] Universities must consider ways to cooperate with society, as well as openly contribute the results obtained from their educational and research activities.

[Administration and Financial Affairs] Universities must carry out appropriate administration and management in accordance with written rules and regulations in order to exhibit their functions smoothly and

sufficiently. Universities must also establish the appropriate organization for clerical work, as well as establish and manage a necessary and solid financial base in order to support, maintain and improve education and research.

[Internal Quality Assurance] Universities must develop a system for assuring the quality of their education, regularly conduct self-studies, and publish information about their current state in order to realize their own missions and goals.

These standards are given to all faculty members and administrators at the universities that are going through accreditation procedures and these ten standards must be met to achieve accreditation status. If any of the standards are not met, the university has a deadline by which they are allowed to make changes to hit the targets, after which, if they are still unmet, accreditation is denied.

4. HOW DO INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR MEMBERS VIEW THE JUAA ACCREDITATION?

Research conducted by the author on a private case institution going through an accreditation procedure explored how members of the organization made sense of the procedure (Birchley, 2013). Using research from change management as a theoretical framework and sensemaking as a lens, the pertinent findings are shared below.

4.1. Identity

By exploring how academic faculty made sense of the procedure, it was found that there were clear examples of friction between faculty members' roles as educators, academic researchers, and university administrators. Debates and discussions surrounding what a university actually is and faculty members' roles in the institution were central to respondents' discussions. Faculty were concerned about the teaching-research-administration balance they were expected to juggle, stating issues with responsibility and professionalism. It appeared that when the over-worked faculty began to notice an incident related to the accreditation while wearing one 'hat' they quickly became conscious of how the associated change would impact them in their other 'hats'. Their identities were constructed around particular parts of their job; examining different circumstances through differing identities lead to a negation of their identity. The respondents showed that emotionally, they were often at odds with their sense of identity. This was not surprising as at times of instability, there can be a crisis of professional identity. Research shows that identity and loyalty of academics lies within their own departments and within their own field (Clegg, 2003; Coaldrake & Steadman, 1998) so when tasked with taking part in a university-wide accreditation, it is unsurprising that the faculty interviewed expressed conflicts with their identities.

4.2. Sense of Purpose

Based on the evidence from Birchley's (2013) research, it is clear to see that despite the best efforts of the JUAA to encourage reflection and growth within the institution, faculty are still far from convinced of the purpose and benefits of going through an accreditation procedure. Some faculty expressed disillusionment at the process and questioned the academic rigor of the procedure, with some respondents showing outright disrespect for the evaluators.

Despite the accreditation calling for a more cooperative model of self-study, the managerial approach to making decisions related to the accreditation was conducted by senior management without collaboration with faculty themselves. Although many faculty were responsible for contributing to the reports to be submitted, they stated they had little direct involvement (Middlehurst & Elton, 1992) and that in some cases, they didn't contribute as they felt it to be a waste of their time and energy. Ericson (2001) states that to be a strategist means being involved in all aspects of the organization in times of change. The JUAA examiners are attempting to encourage and implement change through the accreditation; yet, it is the senior management team within the university that need to be key strategists, involving the whole organization in the process.

4.3. Defining the University and the Procedure

The findings indicated that the whole accreditation procedure only outlines what the university *is*. It only gives the philosophy of how to do the work, it defines the outcomes but does not do enough to show the actual future of the institution (Levin, 2009:93) and does not show the true heart of the institution. Employees saw the procedure as a 'duty,' 'a myth,' 'a requirement' as they tried to make sense of it. The term '*duty*' is interesting from a Japanese cultural perspective as the term *gimu* and the synonym being responsibility (*sekinin*) are thought to be deeply embedded in Japanese culture. In Japanese, the cultural concept of gift giving or *Giri* helps to explain the significance of the idea of '*duty*'. Carrier (1990) explored the concept of gift giving in Japanese culture and believed that the exchange of gifts is 'socially regulated' (p.19) he continued the work of Benedict (1989) who explored the use of the words '*giri*' and '*ori*' - debt and obligation. *Gimu* according to Benedict (1989) is something that a person must do, no matter how troublesome or difficult it is, as he owes doing it to his/her family or superiors. Even if those complying with the act feel unwilling, it is never defined outwardly as unwilling. In this instance, many respondents stated they had an obligation to follow the accreditation procedures and thus, they did it. Therefore, if people make sense of the procedure as merely a '*duty*,' something they must comply with, is the procedure really worthwhile? Will the procedure be a catalyst for positive reflection and change if people are not invested in the process? I argue

that the accreditation procedure in Japan, despite its claims to encourage autonomous improvement through engaged peer-review and internal quality assurance, is a box ticking exercise that is completed with little enthusiasm by a limited number of faculty. It could be argued that the true purpose of quality assurance in this case institution was lost.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The JAAA accreditation procedure model can be likened to the process of sensemaking; it is calling on the institution and individuals to understand their identity, understand and react to their environment, socially interact with each other, note cues around them, look retrospectively and is ongoing. It is argued that accreditation of HE institutions in Japan is a process that is intended to improve the quality of the institution to better establish the institution within the domestic and global HE market. Since the JAAA places so much emphasis on peer-review and faculty involvement, the institution needs a clear culture of collaboration, trust and support already established to benefit from the JAAA model.

As can be seen from the documents produced by the JAAA, the whole accreditation process is dependent on all people within the institution making collective sense of the procedure:

When constructing an internal quality assurance system, it is important to clarify goals and plans, share these with constituent members, make diligent efforts to realize these goals and plans, and steadily improve quality based on appropriate feedback from checks/evaluations and reform. (JAAA Handbook p.4)

They continually ask in documentation, 'do the constituent members thoroughly share understanding?' Yet, as can be seen through the interviews, there is a limited shared understanding and collective sensemaking. The way that members understand the organization could be thought of as an outcome of the sensemaking process, and thus, in terms of the JAAA expectations, the results are disappointing. There were not enough creative measures taken to raise awareness and share views; nor were there enough incentives to enhance individual efforts that provided opportunities to develop a true learning organization, in the style the JAAA advocates in its self-study review approach. McGill, Slocum, and Lei (1993:16) observed that building a learning organization requires leaders to 'develop employees who see their organization as a system,' and in this instance, they did not. If the mission of the JAAA is to foster a continuing culture of change and improvement in the institution, there is a need for increased opportunities for the faculty and administration to engage in more group activities where they work solving problems and discussing more openly and frankly their thoughts and opinions. This process should not continue indefinitely and should be well managed in order for action to

take place. If there is a better understanding of the sensemaking that is going on among faculty, receptivity to change could be better harnessed.

After observing the procedure it is argued that a quality assurance system, like the JUAA accreditation procedure, should have the following characteristics:

- ✓ QA systems should assign roles to *all* faculty during the procedure and should make everyone's responsibilities explicit;
- ✓ QA systems should take more precautions against write-ups;
- ✓ QA systems should focus on *Kaizen*; the concept of continuous improvement;
- ✓ QA systems should be transparent and free from bias, ensuring that those responsible for completing internal tasks relating to the accreditation are not overly influenced by politics and hierarchal relationships within the institution;
- ✓ QA systems should ensure that communication channels should be clear and this will assist in encouraging all faculty members to willingly participate;
- ✓ QA systems should clearly communicate the philosophy of the approach to quality;
- ✓ QA systems should examine levels of trust within the organization.

It is hoped that this research will be beneficial to academics and researchers within institutions experiencing an accreditation procedure in Japan to help them better understand the challenges associated with accreditation and quality assurance as those involved in such procedures must learn how to create and sustain an organizational context and culture for successful and effective change.

The next challenge for Japanese higher education institutions, thanks to the government rhetoric of globalization, is to ensure organizations reach global standards. How *'quality'* is defined on a global scale is the new focus of Japanese academia and will no doubt continue to be as Japanese higher education institutions seek to move further and further up the world university rankings.

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