

State and University in Japanese Higher Education: Historical Perspectives

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One of the important perspectives on Asian higher education systems is how the West influenced them. While some countries with colonial past had to be bound with the metropolitan system, other countries had wider scopes of choice. The latter group of countries could in fact adopt different traditions at the same time. That, however, created its own problems.

Japan is one of the examples. When Japan introduced the institution of modern higher education, it adopted two very different models at the same time. On the one hand, the government introduced the German concept of higher education, which may be called the “State Facility Model” of higher educating. On the other, the American concept of private institutions of higher education, which may be called the “Corporate Model” of higher education, was adopted to provide the basis for private institutions.

The two models, which constitute the major two patterns of modern university, had contrasting concepts as to the relation between the state, society and university. The coexistence of the two sectors, and therefore the two concepts, has been the source of both the conflicts in higher education policy and the dynamisms for the development of higher education.

In the early Meiji period, the public and private sectors of higher education competed for legitimacy. The conflict reflected the power struggle between the new government and the middle class that was not encompassed under the government influences. Eventually, the government compromised by admitting some of the private institutions as full-status universities. The arrangement, formalized by the Higher Education Law of 1918, constituted the dual structure of higher education that has remained to this day.

The dual structure provided the basis of massification of higher education in the postwar period. When the demands for the opportunity of higher education expanded under rapid economic growth, the private institutions responded quickly to expand the supply. That, however, created

severe disparities between the two sectors in student contribution and the quality of services.

A compromise was sought again by instituting government subsidies to the private institutions. The subsidy, however, was combined with the government authority to control establishment and expansion of private institutions. This regime of government support and control of private institutions was accepted by the private institutions, for it promised financial stability.

As the century turned, the prospective decrease in the demand for higher education due to demographic change, the advent of knowledge society, and the rising waves of globalization changed the perspectives for higher education. Reforms in higher education have been called for as one of the keys for restructuring the society and economy for the new age.

One of the foremost issues was the reform of national universities. Under strong political initiatives, the national universities will be transformed to a "National University Corporation" in the spring 2004. Through this change, the national universities will be given greater degree of independence; but they have to face strict evaluation on their performance at the same time.

As the plan becomes more concrete, however, it has been revealed that the proposed scheme involves serious inconsistencies. Essentially the problem boils down to the issue if there can be any halfway between the State Facility model and Corporate model. In this sense, the issue that was created when Japanese higher education started some one hundred and thirty years ago is still alive and asserting itself again.