

210 The Successes and Challenges of Implementing Assessment Plans in Japanese Higher Education: Using Student Learning Data within a New Quality Management Framework

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Research Domains

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Abstract

In line with international trends, Japanese higher education (HE) has recently emphasized the importance of assessing educational learning outcomes and making such learning “visible.” Specifically, the Japanese government has encouraged universities to implement institutional-level Assessment Plans that specify different indices to document and evaluate student learning attainment. This attention on learning assessment is occurring as new HE educational governance and quality structures --broadly known as “Learning Management”—are being dramatically reformed within Japan. To understand how Assessment Plans are being implemented and used at the institutional level in this context, this study conducted a nationwide survey. On the one hand, the results suggest that Japanese HE has broadly succeeded in adopting institutional-level assessment of student learning outcomes within a relatively short time. On the other hand, evidence suggests that issues remain, both in how such assessment data is used and in the different ways organizations implement such plans in practice.

Full paper

Introduction

In line with the outcomes-centered approach emphasized by the Bologna Process, Japanese Higher Education (HE) has recently recognized the importance of articulating student learning outcomes at the institutional level (Chukyoshin, 2016). As with other HE systems, Japan’s shift to outcomes-based education has increased the need to make learning “visible” (Hamana, 2018). Universities have been asked to create “Assessment Plans” that capture student learning attainment and convey these results to campus leadership (Chukyoshin, 2020). Japanese institutions, however, face an additional challenge: the simultaneous reform of quality governance processes --known as “Learning Management”— focused on making educational leadership more efficient and coordinated (Chukyoshin, 2018). Given the lack of a “decision-support” tradition in Japanese HE, Japanese Institutional Research offices confront new assessment demands while negotiating an evolving administrative landscape wherein this data is used.

By exploring the intersection of organizational management and learning practice, this study also contributes to the scholarship (e.g. Ruef and Nag, 2015) analyzing the interrelationship of university category-type and institutional behavior. Contextualized within Japan’s dramatically declining college-age population, the meaning and nature of universities’ Assessment Plans could vary significantly. A large, internationally ranked research institution such as the University of Tokyo, for example, could conceive of its assessment needs quite differently from that of small, tuition-dependent private schools. The Japanese government has encouraged this thinking by urging private institutions to consider pursuing one of four future “types” of HEIs that it feels possess the best chance of surviving. (MEXT, 2022). By analyzing the assessment practices of both research-oriented national universities, community-oriented municipal/prefectural universities and tuition-dependent private universities, this paper will provide new insight into how organizational imperatives and quality assurance demands interact in complex ways.

Methods

This research conducted a nation-wide survey of accredited 4-year Japanese universities during 2022-2023. An online survey questionnaire was sent to the academic affairs vice-president of all 787 accredited 4-year institutions.

The survey's goal was to inventory, at a national level, both the assessment content of these Plans, and to explore how such data is used within Japanese HE institutions in practice.

Results

The survey received 240 responses, or a 30.5% response rate. Approximately, 71% of responses came from private institutions, with the remaining survey responses coming equally from national and municipal/prefectural universities. This is in line with the national ratio.

In terms of results, two-thirds of respondent universities reported that they had adopted Assessment Plans at their institutions, suggesting widespread adoption at the national level. **(See Table 1)** Nonetheless, challenges inhibiting the effectiveness of these Assessment Plans were visible. Only 14% of university vice-presidents who implemented such plans said that their assessment data was "often" used by their organizations. **(See Table 2)** Additionally, only 24% of these universities reported "regularly auditing" their assessment plans, raising the possibility of Assessment Plans becoming routinized and losing their original dynamism. **(See Table 3)**

Survey results of universities implementing Assessment Plans likewise suggest that the meaning and function of these plans differ greatly by institution category. National universities appear to have approached these plans as longer-term tools of curricular reflection, while private institutions seem to use plans as immediate, external feedback mechanisms to gauge student satisfaction and performance. The indices most used by private schools, for example, were enrollee satisfaction scores and job-placement performance (79% and 80% respectively versus only 60% and 52% respectively for national universities). Along these same lines, private school Assessment Plans were about twice as likely as national universities (64% vs. 32%) to use 3rd-party credentials and qualifications to demonstrate program learning attainment. In contrast, national universities' most popular assessment indices were the attainment of learning outcomes as defined by their own academic programs (i.e. 68% for national institutions vs. 51% for private ones). **(See Table 4)** The contrast between the reflective orientation of national universities and the consumer satisfaction emphasis of private schools is also seen in how different universities approach the assessment process. In contrast to 40% of national universities "regularly auditing" their assessment plans, only 22.3% of private universities did likewise. **(See Table 3)**

Discussion

Given that the government has promoted institution-level Assessment Plans for only a decade, the overall adoption rate within Japanese HE is impressive. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that challenges remain, both with regards to how the data is used, and in the frequency with which assessment indices are themselves reevaluated. Finally, more attention must be paid to how institutional category informs the adoption of Assessment Plans, as the nature of these plans appears to vary greatly between private and national institutions.

Table 1:

| Respondent # : 240 | | University Category | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Answer | | Total n=240 | National n=34 | Municipal- Prefectural n=34 | Private n=172 |
| Assessment Plan Formulated | | 66.7% | 73.5% | 41.2% | 70.3% |
| | Plan Made Public | 41.3% | 44.1% | 32.4% | 42.4% |
| | Partly Publicized, or Plan to Publicize | 10.8% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 11.6% |
| | Not Publicized | 14.6% | 17.6% | 2.9% | 16.3% |
| Assessment Plan Not Formulated | | 33.3% | 26.5% | 58.8% | 29.7% |
| Totals | | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

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Table 2:

| Respondent # : 160 | | University Category | | | |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Response | | Total | National | Mun-Pref | Private |
| Results Used Often | | 23% | 5% | 1% | |
| | | 14.4% | 20.0% | 7.1% | 1% |
| Results Used Somewhat | | 9% | 15% | 8% | 5% |
| | | 56.3% | 60.0% | 57.1% | 5% |
| Results Not Really Used | | 32% | 5% | 2% | 2% |
| | | 20.0% | 20.0% | 14.3% | 2% |
| Results Not Used At All | | 4% | 0% | 1% | 1% |
| | | 2.5% | 0.0% | 7.1% | 1% |
| Other | | 11% | 0% | 2% | 1% |
| | | 6.9% | 0.0% | 14.3% | 1% |
| Total | | 160 | 25 | 14 | 10 |
| | | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Table 3:

| Does your university review/audit its Assessment Plan's implementation and content? | | | | |
|---|-------|---------------------|----------|---------|
| Response # : 160 | | | | |
| Answer | Total | University Category | | |
| | | National | Mun-Pref | Private |
| Regularly Auditing Plan | 39 | 10 | 2 | 27 |
| | 24.4% | 40.0% | 14.3% | 22.3% |
| Not Regularly Auditing, but sometimes review it | 68 | 9 | 5 | 54 |
| | 42.5% | 36.0% | 35.7% | 44.6% |
| Not really Auditing Plan | 32 | 5 | 5 | 22 |
| | 20.0% | 20.0% | 35.7% | 18.2% |
| Not Auditing Plan at All | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| | 3.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 4.1% |
| Other | 16 | 1 | 2 | 13 |
| | 10.0% | 4.0% | 14.3% | 10.7% |
| Total | 160 | 25 | 14 | 121 |

Table 4:

| What indices/data are included in your university's Assessment Plan? | | |
|--|-------------|--------------|
| Response : 160 | | |
| 項目 | 合計 n=160 | Natio n=2 |
| GPA | 91% | 6 |
| Student Satisfaction Surveys/Sense of Growth | 74% | 6 |
| Graduate School/Job Placement Rate | 74% | 5 |
| Degree Attainment | 67% | 3 |
| Retention Rate | 62% | 4 |
| Acquisition of 3 rd Party Credentials/Qualifications | 57% | 3 |
| Amount of Time Spent Studying Out of Class | 54% | 4 |
| Learning Goal Attainments in Courses | 54% | 6 |
| Results of Admission Test Results | 49% | 3 |
| Percentage of Students Who Study Abroad | 48% | 4 |
| Amount of Time Learning in Class | 47% | 2 |
| Results of Placement Tests | 45% | 1 |

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