

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN JAPAN AND LESSONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION IN VIETNAM

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1. CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN JAPAN

Japan is known as an adaptable nation – famous for its success in achieving two great transformations in its modern history. First, following the Meiji restoration in 1868, a cadre of reformists was able to transform feudal Japan into a fast-growing modern nation state by directing all of the nation’s energies toward the goal of catching up with “the west”. Then, after the Second World War, Japan was able to adjust equally efficiently to a new world order dominated by the United States – incorporating new democratic institutions and continuing its campaign to achieve economic parity with the western powers. In each these great transformations, education reform played a central role, especially in higher education system.

Firstly, from the Meiji Restoration, Japan attempted to establish a modern university based on the European model. It began with the foundation of the University of Tokyo in 1877. From 1886, the University of Tokyo was transformed into the Imperial University of Tokyo. In the subsequent years, an additional 6 imperial university were established in various parts of Japan¹.

At the same time, several Western-style technical institutions set up by the government and private individuals with prestigious reputations became universities and colleges. Such as Keio University (1890), Waseda University (1902), Hitotsubashi University (1920) and the Tokyo Institute of Technology (1929).

Also, there were other official universities; locally established public universities; private universities; non-degree granting technical and professional colleges; and separate women’s colleges.

The higher educational system in this period was controlled by the central government through the establishment of strict regulations and quality standards to grant permission for the establishment of higher education institutions. The universities stratified according to their status, history and reputation.

¹ Kyoto in 1897, Tohoku in 1907, Kyushu in 1910, Hokkaido in 1918, Osaka in 1931, Nagoya in 1939

Secondly, after World War II, Japan carried out education reforms based on the American model. The hierarchical higher education system was also reformed.

All previous higher education institutions were grouped under the same status as “daigaku” (new university), the former non-degree granting technical and professional colleges were upgraded to universities or merged into the new universities. At least one national university was established in every prefecture.

Institutions that could not satisfy the conditions to upgrade to daigaku-status, were called “tanki-daigaku” or “junior colleges” as a temporary measure.

The imperial universities lost their formal status as “elite institutions” and were integrated into the newly created university system.

In this period, the quality assurance of higher education institutions relied on two main bodies: (1) the standards for the establishment of university (1956) and the Japan University Accreditation Association (1947). It was also assured by the government strict standards and regulations.

From 1964, the Economic Council issued a report entitled, “*Issues and Measures concerned with Human Ability Development in the Context of Economic Growth*”, called for the planned training of a labor force for the development of industry and society.

The policy for diversifying higher education was adopted. The government deregulated the procedure to establish private universities and grew increasingly diversified with the introduction of varied professional training programs. In 1981, a law to establish the University of the Air (called the Open University today) was enacted. Designed to provide lifelong learning opportunities to Japanese people, it started classes in 1985 by TV and radio.

Since the 1990s, with the implementation of policies that focus on liberalization, deregulation and increased institutional autonomy, the role of the government has shifted from setting strict regulations and quality standards to organizing an evaluation system for assessing the learning outcomes and improving accountability of the higher education institutions. Japan government simplified the basic principles for the university curriculum. Each university was given greater discretion to construct a curriculum independently and the universities were placed under an obligation to give a detailed report in the form of self-monitoring and self-evaluation on their teaching and research activities.

Since 2004, an independent corporation status was given to all national universities to improve their independence and autonomy in order to revitalize teaching and research activities. One major structural reform was the incorporation of all 86 national universities which became national university corporations. In accordance with this reform, the national universities became autonomous corporations with their own managing board, and chief executive (president) with authority over budgets, planning, the employment of staff and salary scales. Such this would enable each national university to become independent from the national framework and manage itself under its own responsibility under the leadership of the president of the university. This is a great transformation of the legal status and management system of the national universities. Along with these changes, MEXT established the Certified Evaluation and Accreditation system to strengthen evaluation and improve accountability of the higher education institutions.

The higher education system in Japan from the pre-war to the post-war was characterized by the change from an elitist to a mass higher education and during this period, the quality control of the higher education system relied mostly on the establishment-approval system. From the 1990s when the establishment-approval system was deregulated and the self-monitoring and self-evaluation systems were implemented, Japan reached the stage of universalization with more than half of the 18 year-olds enrolled in higher education. From the 2000s with the introduction of major structural reforms that turn the national universities into autonomous “corporations” and the third party evaluation system was added to the existing self-monitoring and self – evaluation systems in order to enhance quality and accountability of higher education institutions.

2. LESSONS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN VIETNAM

The Vietnamese government response to the requirement for structural adjustments was the adoption of a market approach called “market-oriented economy” (or, in Vietnamese, Doi Moi) at the Sixth Party Congress in 1986. The approach has caused significant reform to the structure and conditions of the Vietnamese economy and government. Therefore, the development of the education sector is strongly influenced by these reforms.

Since the late90’s of the last century, Vietnam has conducted the reform in higher education. Before the reforms, state-owned educational institutions were the only model. As a result of the reform process, “Socialization of education” (or, in Vietnamese, “Xã hội hóa giáo dục”) has enabled many different actors to

become financially involved in the sector. Accordance with that, new forms of education and training have been developed simultaneously in addition to traditional public education, including new semi-public and private institutions (or non-public universities). Also, various forms of training are offered, including full-time, part-time, and distance education for various degrees such as undergraduate, postgraduate, and vocational and technical training.

Although, Vietnam's higher education system has undergone dramatic change during the past decade (the high growth rates in university enrollments, the university scope and network has better met the people's learning requirements, the development of private universities, the increase of investment in higher education, ...) but problems remain. For example:

Approximately 15% of relevant age group participating in higher education.

Legislative provisions for the rapidly expanding private universities are weak.

The process of curriculum renewal is slow moving and bureaucratic.

Graduates are poorly prepared in terms of their range of skills and capacities beyond those required for narrowly academic pursuits

A severe lack of close links between higher education institutions and scientific research, businesses, industries and employers

Thus, the contemporary Vietnam's higher education reveals serious barriers and negative implications for skilled workforce development and attracting foreign direct investment, and most importantly, for the long-term competitiveness and growth of Vietnam in the global knowledge economy. Therefore, Vietnam needs to be addressed the above issues and adopt a holistic approach to reform rather than focus mainly on achieving quantitative targets as outlined in the 2006 to 2020 Higher Education Reform Agenda which was seen to be too ambitious (World Bank, 2008). Lessons from Japanese higher education reforms for Vietnam could be:

- Improvements in institutional performance levels which could be stimulated by changes to major policies influencing the sector, such as conferring legal autonomy on higher education institutions. The operation and governance of the higher education system and the decision-making by the education sector may need to be more flexible, allowing greater initiatives for private institution to compete in the market.

- Developing a system of quality assurance for higher education is important considerations.

In conclusion, the reforms and changes in higher education should be accompanied with a quality assurance and evaluation system that has also changed to fulfill the different needs and roles of the higher education system in Vietnam.

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