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# World Rankings and Universities in Japan : Analyzing a Single Case

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世界大学ランキングにおける日本の大学：ある大学を一例とした考察

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## Abstract :

World rankings of universities have the power to influence the goals and directives of individual institutions throughout the world. Many universities in Japan are no exception. Osaka University is one specific institution that has made explicit and public its goal to rise in the world rankings. This article provides a content analysis of the university's declaration to become a top 10 university in the world. By narrowly focusing on research outputs and funding, Osaka University provides a snapshot of a university administration that sees as its overarching goal to provide financial enticements as a solution for all occasions. Focusing on quantitatively measurable outcomes that will satisfy criteria of ranking regimes causes universities to prioritize the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and research outcomes that meet globally measured standards. This results in a lack of attention being paid to the local and national context, or what is called the glonacal by Marginson and Rhoades. Glonacal represents the balance between global, national, and locally relevant objectives of higher education institutions. The article takes a critical perspective on the tendency to overlook this balance and be overly-focused on the global level.

要旨：高等教育機関のゴール等は、世界の大学ランキングによって影響を受ける。日本においてもそれは例外ではない。国立大学法人大阪大学は、世界ランキングを向上させることを表明しているが、当該大学が世界ランキング10位以内に入るとした宣言の内容を分析した結果、様々なレベルでのコンテクストを十分に考慮していないことが明らかとなった。本論では、さらに、このバランスを考慮せず、グローバルレベルに焦点を合わせている面をクリティカルに考察する。

**Key words** : higher education, world university rankings, globalization of higher education

## Introduction

“The University of Osaka can be regarded as a top public institution that has improved its prestige and performance for almost thirty years” (Yonezawa, Nakatsuji, & Kobayashi, 2002).

The key words “top” and “prestige” in this quote go a long way towards describing policy and change in world-class universities in Kansai, Japan. When considering in practical terms ways in

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which universities are judged to be prestigious, research productivity has become the dominant factor in both Japan and world university rankings. In looking specifically at policy and changes that university leaders and administrators are implementing to move towards stated goals, one identifiable presupposition is that funded and published research should be prioritized. In order to get a broader picture of the importance of research in strategic planning in higher education institutions (HEI), I conducted a content analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) looking primarily at Osaka University (OU), one of the top public, comprehensive research-intensive universities in Japan (Asahi Shimbun, 2014). This university was selected based on its publicly announced plan to become a top 10 ranked university in the world.

Perhaps the dominant paradigm through which leading Japanese universities have designed and implemented strategic plans is prestige, or competing to be a leading institution. With a declining Japanese population, increasing competition from the Chinese, other regional, and global higher education (HE) contexts, Japanese universities are forced to adapt to an environment of globalizing HE. This emphasis on being at a global level of quality in terms of at least two of the HE pillars – research and teaching – does not apply to all universities in Japan, but does figure prominently in the case of OU. OU is one of the most active universities with regards to competing on an international level, as is evidenced by the 17th president of the university’s proclamation to lead the university to become one of the top 10 research universities in the world by 2031. This article discusses the steps involved in OU’s plan, examines the evidence the university will use to measure its success, and takes a critical perspective regarding OU’s avowed approach to managing and monitoring the progress of the changes from a predominantly financial or business perspective. In looking at the history of the leaders of the university, and analyzing OU’s using the world league tables as benchmarks, the article concludes that a more nuanced balance between local, regional, and global goals for universities should be sought after.

### **Osaka University—One of the Top 10 Research Universities in the World by 2031**

To introduce the general idea of the university’s strategic plan, the 17th president of the university is the author of the main goals document, writing in the first person. In introducing his plan, President Hirano makes it clear that he is personally dedicated to seeing it through. It should be noted, also, that in this introductory document, Hirano does specifically mentions the importance of the “trustees and other OU members” (OU, 2013 a). It is, therefore, a personal directive from the president, as well as a plea to the faculty, staff, and related stakeholders to assist him in carrying out the plan.

The strategic plan is broken up into the following parts :

- (1) Inviting topnotch personnel from outside (Japan),
- (2) Enhancing development of human resources on campus,
- (3) Project to promote university globalization, and
- (4) Improvement of management at education and research organizations (OU, 2013 b).

Because OU’s goal is to be among the best in the world, all of the separate parts of the plan include a necessary aspect of globalization, or operating at a global level with regards to output and performance. In reflecting on this plan, systematically employing and incorporating double-loop learn-

ing (Argyris, 1991), key presuppositions need to be addressed before I will be able to detail and analyze the evidence that underlies each aspect of the change.

Hierarchy and ranking have always been a part of the HE sector in Japan (Yonezawa, 2013). Similarly, the elite universities have since their inception been intricately shaped by and involved in internationalization. For example, the psychology departments at Tokyo University (1903) and Kyoto University (1906) – the first and top universities in Japan – were set up by Japanese scholars who had PhD degrees from John Hopkins and Yale (US universities), respectively (Oyama, Sato, & Suzuki, 2001). Also, the first president of OU in 1931, Hantaro Nagaoka was a physicist who studied under the British professor C. G. Knott at Tokyo University. He then did post-doc work at the universities of Berlin, Munich, and Vienna for a span of three years (Gillispie, 1981, p.606). Similarly, the president of the university at the time of this analysis, Hirano, spent three years researching in the US as a post-doc at the National Institute of Health in Maryland (OU, 2013 c). This pattern repeats at most HEI in Japan. The top, most influential professors and leaders have experiences abroad, or were trained by western professors. My argument in focusing on this historical aspect is to suggest that instead of being a recent change force in HE, internationalization has always been a core ingredient. The question then becomes, what exactly is being changed now in focusing on internationalization and globalization?

In summary, with regards to OU specifically, for the previous president Hirano to present this plan to become a top research university in the world by way of increasing international faculty, students, and producing global-minded graduates and globally relevant research is to gloss over the fact that this has actually always been a part of the practices and policy of the university, as is further evidenced by the Yonezawa et al. (2002) quote at the opening of this essay. Also, when it became a public imperial university in 1931, the president of the university explicitly stated that he wanted to make it the best university in Japan (OU, 2013 d). I would question the 17th president's plan to become one of the best universities in the world to be anything other than a rhetorical spin on the status quo, and as I argue below, a way to incentivize increased performance through providing extra funding.

### **Evidence Used to Measure Success**

A key difference that the plan I sketch above adds to the activities of OU may be the recent rise in prominence of global league tables. Two of the most widely cited rankings are the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Sahnghai Jiao Tong University, and Times Higher Education World University Rankings started in 2003 and 2004, respectively (Marope & Wells, 2013, p.8). The Japanese HE system is no stranger to rankings. Partly due to the stratified nature of social institutions in Japanese society, informal university rankings have existed in Japan since before WWII (Yonezawa et al., 2002, p.374). One aspect of Japanese traditional history related to social feudalistic organization is a clear hierarchy, or *tateshakai*. For secondary school graduates, their teachers, and families to make better, informed choices about universities, Japanese HEIs have always been ordered from top to bottom. The widely used Asahi newspaper university rankings began to publish a formal ranking in 1994 (Yonezawa, 2013). The criteria were much like those used by world ranking regimes today, looking at grants received, research publications, bibliometrics, and contribution to society.

An assumption underlying OU's plan to be one of the top 10 universities in the world is that the criteria used to measure this assessment is what the university will use to both develop its plan and to gauge its success. Because the university does not specifically mention any type of evidence or ranking system, I will turn to a recent article on rankings and discuss four world rankings that Marginson (2014) analyzes.

Leiden University ranks universities on single indicators, namely "volume of science papers, volume of citations of those papers, citations per paper, the number of papers in the top 10% of their field by citation rates, and the proportion of the university's papers in the last category" (p.8). Another objective and fair system (but limited to the sciences, with a narrow focus on research) ranking universities is based on the Scopus database, called Scimago. It uses similar measures to Leiden University, focusing on "primary scientific outputs . . . and the academic impact of research in those disciplines as expressed by citation patterns" (p.11). Marginson favors these two ways of ranking because they are based on objective measures only.

Notice, however, that neither of these systems uses any measures related to teaching or any other activity outside of research. Because OU is also focusing on increasing the number of international faculty and students on campus, as well as developing home students into global human resources, one more ranking including these aspects should be considered. The Times Higher Education (THE) rankings are one of the most visible in the world. Along with research indicators similar to the two rankings listed above, THE includes reputational surveys, income indicators, PhD studies, internationalization, and student-staff ratio (Marginson, 2014, p.11). In order to get some perspective on OU's stated goals, it should be noted that at the time of this analysis it is ranked 144 on the THE world ranking.

The measures these world league tables figure into their equations are the areas where OU will need to achieve success. The university's documents do not explicitly address these aspects needed to achieve a higher ranking. The only details OU documents mention are support measures it will use to achieve its goal (OU, 2013 b). Reading the details of the four parts of the plan listed above – personnel from outside, human resources on campus, university globalization, and improving management of education and research – the dominant theme is funding. Specifically, in each of the four sections, funding is listed as the number one way to support the plan. Under the subheading "Support program for researchers applying to grant-in-aid" we read the following :

"In order to support researchers who apply for large-scale competitive funds, Osaka University will grant research funds to researchers who applied for 'Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research' or 'Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists' [grants from the national government] and who apply for obtaining funds from upper funding programs." (OU, 2013 b)

In other words, the university will provide funding to researchers simply for applying for funding. This subsection is under the section of the plan to "enhance development of human resources on campus." The entire section reads like the passage quoted here. In fact, all four of the focus areas for the plan to become a top 10 research university are to be supported by funding. There are almost no supports listed in this document that do not pertain to financing. OU's management plan to make the university one of the top in the world also consists of offering more and more funding. Although there may be evidence of transformational leadership in OU's strategic plan aiming to become a top 10 university in the world, which is unlikely when Tokyo, Kyoto, and a few other uni-

versities here in Japan are ranked more highly, the tangible support measures of reaching goals through offering financial incentives is a clear case of predominantly transactional leadership by the president and administration (McCaffery, 2010, p.85).

The only areas of the plan President Hirano writes about explicitly are aimed at faculty and researchers. There is no mention of how the students or other stakeholders will be affected. Even a prominent research-intense university such as OU should maintain strong ties to the local and national community, to develop side by side the global and the local aspects of their mission (see Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). One example of evidence that could be actively used by the university in measuring the impact on society can be found in a section of the Asahi Shimbun rankings. To gauge the level of community impact a university has, the newspaper counts factors such as appearances in public media, consultations to governmental committees, and popular publications for magazines and newspapers. This is an interesting way to measure the local impact faculty can have in their community. This focus on the local is largely missing from the wealth of documents discussing OU's future plans. There is a need for leaders of world class HEIs to resist over-focusing on the global at the expense of the national or local (Agnew, 2012).

### **Analysis of Policy and Leadership—Broader Implications**

In order to gain a wider perspective on the issues discussed above, for the remainder of the paper, I will relate the case of OU to the wider sector in Japan and the global HE environment. OU is one of the original seven imperial universities that were founded before WWII. At the outset of their existence, they were all under direct control of the Ministry of Education (established in 1871), and their purpose was to aid the nation with industry and military progress (Anzai & Matsuzawa, 2013). One rationale for considering the historical context is to make the point that public universities are still considered by many to be a branch of the state, and this is especially the case of the leading universities, of which Osaka is one. Rather than being a revolutionary or dramatic change policy for OU to aim at becoming a top university in the world, this is simply an adoption of the language and method that is currently gaining attention in HE, with respect to global ranking regimes. The university is simply following along with many other institutions that are ranked in the top few hundred in the THE rankings, and publicly stating that they are in the elite, and aim to rise even more. Far from being a shocking case of reaching for the stars through strategic planning, President Hirano's proclamation is simply an explicit declaration that the university has always been one of the best in Japan, and by extension the world, and now is re-formulating this mission into one that can be measured and increasingly funded.

Although for OU, this claim of being one of the best is an old theme wearing a new rhetorical hat, their explicitly using the world rankings to drive policy raises several questions. One issue discussed in the literature on rankings is "that this notion of global academic 'success' has been developed within the wider context of a worldview that is essentially neo-liberal in its ideological preferences and hegemonic in its geopolitical framework" (Scott, 2013, p.125). As I mention above, many of the rankings are focused on science and technology disciplines. In fact, many of them do not even include social science and humanities publications in the research tally. In other words, far from being a comprehensive ranking of universities, they are basically rankings of scientific output and impact. Again, this is further evidence that OU leadership is protecting the status quo, as the top

public universities have always been focused on science and technology development to aid the economy (Bartholomew, 1978).

This old-standing, but rapidly increasing influence of HEIs being seen primarily as feeders for the economy is neoliberalism run amok. Although few education professionals would argue against the importance of one of the traditional roles of HEIs to prepare students for the world after graduation, global economic development and a rise in ways to quantitatively measure everything is leading more and more scholars to question the immense power of external forces, such as global economic trends, managerialism, and commercialization of HE (Ball, 2012). Although many universities in Japan still receive a relatively large amount of their funding from the federal government, including faculty research funding, the effects of commodification and business-world management is growing in public and private universities (Iwasaki, 2009).

In looking at the overhaul in public university governance and accountability handed down from the national government to OU and the other 85 public HEIs in 2004, the Ministry of Education made their vision clear and obvious. One of the changes was for all 86 public universities to move to what is called “national university corporations,” which in effect means that they must now proactively revamp their management systems to operate more like businesses, and gain more funding from non-governmental sources. Although there are professors and scholars who deplore this obsession with neoliberal goals (Anzai & Matsuzawa, 2013 ; Iwasaki, 2009), my analysis of policy changes and strategic plans in local Kansai HEIs reveals that there has been a trickle down effect and individual universities have incorporated into their plans for the future a push to be world-class, and are thereby overly focused on economically-useful applied science and technology.

## Conclusion

In order to be highly ranked in world league tables, universities world-wide must be judged based on the exact same criteria as those at the top, presently California Institute of Technology, Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Looking at the top of this THE list of world universities raises the question : Can OU be realistically listed in this group? Not only are national HE sectors different, which includes issues related to native languages, access to research materials, high caliber faculty and students as colleagues, etc. ; types and missions of HEIs also vary.

This paper has focused on OU, due to its status as a research-intense university. In the strategic plan to become a top 10 university in the world, OU is focusing primarily on globally relevant research outputs. When looking at Kwasei Gakuin University (KGU)’s strategic plan with regards to local research, however, the rhetoric therein should be considered as an exemplar of what has been called glonacal – balancing global, national, and local concerns (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Explicitly stated in the university’s goals related to research is its plan to become a “world center for research appropriate to Kwasei Gakuin” (KGU PR Office, 2013). Similar to KGU’s goal to prioritize research that is befitting to the university’s culture, tradition, and strengths, leading universities in Japan could likewise consider how they can play an active part as change agents in shaping and affecting globally relevant research at local and national levels, as opposed to reacting to top universities in North America and the UK as ranked by world ranking regimes.

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