How instructional learning outcomes assessment is related to quality assurance and accreditation? The case of Japan.

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Along with government regulation and accreditation requirements, articulating and assessing learning outcomes as well as building internal quality assurance have become major initiatives in quality assurance in Japan. This paper shares how Japanese universities tackle internal quality assurance building in relation to instructional learning outcomes assessment by examining the following: 1) how universities build internal quality assurance, 2) what learning outcome assessments are embedded in internal quality assurance mechanisms, and 3) how universities perceive internal quality assurance in relation to learning outcomes assessment. The universities offer multiple perspectives on the correlations between internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments, but this provokes debate on what an original purpose should be in implementing internal quality assurance, warning that building internal quality assurance only in response to external requirements is not a substantial goal in itself.

Introduction

Need for transparency in learning outcome assessment and internal quality assurance

Defining, measuring and publishing learning outcomes have been demanded of higher education worldwide to aid accountability and improve the quality of institutions. Learning outcomes can be formulated on different levels in different areas and countries. For example, the Dearing Report (1997) in the United Kingdom, the Spellings Report (United States Department of Education, 2006), graduate attributes in Australia (Barrie, 2007) and OECD (2013) initiatives regarding learning outcomes in higher education emphasise the importance of transparent learning outcomes. Similarly, the government in Japan has encouraged higher education institutions to develop their expected learning outcomes. Building internal quality assurance has become a global trend in recent decades as well. Many higher education institutions have developed internal quality management systems by creating institutional rules and procedures that are related to the management and education provision. In light of this, Japan developed the quality assurance policies and frameworks. Since the 1990s,

internal quality assurance has been discussed in Europe through the Bologna Process. The concept was clarified in a Berlin Communique with the statement that the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself (Bologna Process Ministerial Conference (BPMC), 2003). The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* were adopted in 2005 to emphasise a substantial shift in perspective towards student-centred learning and internal quality assurance, in which quality is primarily the responsibility of higher education itself.

The policy change towards focusing on learning outcomes and internal quality assurance

In response to low birth rates and rapidly ageing society, international economic competition and technology innovation, Japan has reformed the higher education system using multiple government policies (Noda *et al*., 2018). The rapid decline in the birth rate has created a severe condition: Japan is now facing a dramatic drop in the number of university applicants. It is predicted that the population of 18-year-olds will decline by around 70% of current population by 2040 (MEXT, 2018). This problem would have a negative impact on universities, which have largely relied on student tuition for their revenue. Some Japanese universities have already struggled to meet their quota because of the shortage of applicants. The 'Society 5.0′, as named by the Japanese government cabinet office, proposed a coming of age for artificial intelligence, robotics and big data, which will eventually transform our way of living and thinking. In anticipation of these changes, there has been a sense of urgency, together with demands or even complaints from employers about the inadequacy of recent graduates' generic competencies such as taking initiative, creativity, problem-solving skills and communication skills needed for survival in this future society. Thus, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to produce better quality in teaching and research. These demands have, in turn, created a stronger interest in developing meaningful, measurable student learning outcomes. Consistent with the global trends and frameworks, the national quality assurance agency in Japan—the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education (NIAD-QE) has emphasised the assessment of learning outcomes and internal quality assurance building in the review activities as well.

Purpose of the study

Despite the recent emphasis on learning outcomes and internal quality assurance in higher education in Japan, inadequate research has been conducted on the actual quality assurance conditions at these universities. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how Japanese universities have tackled two key areas: internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments. Furthermore, this study examined how universities perceive these two concepts to interact with each other. Likely, internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments are widely understood as an integrated concept, related to each other somehow.

Scant scholarly literature has discussed *how* these are perceived to interact with each other. Hence, this study will not only contribute insights as to how external quality reviews affect the measurement of learning outcomes in the process of internal quality assurance at Asian universities but also how universities perceive the relationship between internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments. Therefore, this study examines the following three research questions.

RQ1. How do universities build internal quality assurance?

RQ2. What learning outcome assessments are embedded in internal quality assurance mechanisms?

RQ3. How do universities perceive internal quality assurance in relation to learning outcome assessments?

Literature review

Government demand for assessing learning outcomes and building internal quality assurance

Along with the development of quality assurance agencies certified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), an accreditation system was implemented in 2004 in Japan. Learning outcomes has been a key issue in higher education discussions and the government report released by the MEXT in 2008 became a major driver pushing universities to stress learning outcomes (MEXT, 2008). MEXT (2016) required that Japanese universities define and publish 'three policies' (a diploma policy, a curriculum policy and admissions policy) to clarify their educational goals, processes and expected learning outcomes in degree programmes so that stakeholders can understand the programme goals and objectives. The diploma policy in particular requires that universities clearly define expected learning outcomes that university graduates should possess.

Further, influenced by the European trend of internal quality assurance, such as the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* published in 2005, the term 'internal quality assurance' first appeared in the government report of 2008 in Japan, which states that quality assurance agencies request universities to develop standards for self-evaluation and strive to check whether or not a permanent internal quality assurance system has been established.

Theoretical framework

Quality assurance regimes have been dominant regulatory tools in higher education management around the world (Jarvis, 2014). Harvey and Newton (2007, p. 225) averred that quality assurance in higher education is ubiquitous because it provides a mean for governments to check higher education. Galkute (2014) contended that the quality assurance

system is the influential policy instrument by reflecting on the relationship between the state and higher education institutions as well as between their autonomy and responsibility for societal transformation. Even though internal quality assurance is regulated by a governmental framework, perspectives and management approaches differ between actors in higher education institutions. Stensaker (2007) analysed how the concept of quality has been translated into higher education. The spread of the idea happens due to translation where the adapting organisations provide their own meaning to what they perceive is the core of the idea. To describe 'fad and fashion management', Stensaker (2007, p. 101) states that by applying to management fashions, organisations legitimate themselves externally by showing how well they reflect major phenomena in society. This statement illuminates the adaptive potential of higher education with regard to environmental and societal expectations. Such management ideas are seen as templates transmitted from the larger national and international society. Thus, developing an internal quality assurance system has become a regulatory tool and, at the same time, institutions have started to copy and follow the templates or institutions that have already implemented the initiatives or to demonstrate 'they are taking action'.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) addressed the notion of 'quality work' in relation to quality management and quality culture. Lawrence *et al.*'s alternative institutional theory sees the shift from institutional logics, rules and procedures to discussions about the relationship between institutions and individual actors who are involved in the operation in the institutional contexts. The 'quality work' emphasises how actors reshape the institution instead of how specific institutional structures, quality system, strategies, norms and values affect quality (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Although the actors are embedded in specific institutional contexts and their actions are guided by various institutional norms, these actors also play an active role in creating, maintaining or disrupting the institutions (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011) based on their preferences and interests. Therefore, quality work stands in a dialectical and dynamic relationship to both managerial and cultural perspectives (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). This study is rooted in Elken and Stensaker's (2018) theoretical framework of quality work, which includes the development of internal quality assurance and involves the intentionality of actors *apropos* their translation into high-quality higher education. This study examined how actors (that is, university academics and senior administrators in charge of quality assurance activities) perceive internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments and how these are interacted with each other, which would eventually lead to innovation, maintenance or disruption of their institutions.

Methodology

To examine RQ1 and RQ2, this study analysed university self-evaluation reports to understand what efforts and initiatives Japanese universities have demonstrated about building internal quality assurance and assessing learning outcomes. This study examined

124 university self-evaluation reports for NIAD-QE's institutional accreditation between fiscal year 2012 and 2018. The text data analysis had focused on accreditation standard 8, which refers to an internal quality assurance system of teaching and learning. Regarding the data analysis procedure, keywords frequently used by the universities were sorted by category and then counted. To explore RQ3, semi-structured interviews were conducted that involved participants from 10 Japanese universities. The respondents comprised academics and senior administrators engaged in quality assurance activities and examined how they perceived the relationship between internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments.

Findings

In Japan, since the concepts 'student learning outcomes' and 'internal quality assurance' were introduced, the higher education community has made efforts, despite much confusion, to disseminate ideas and implement them by developing accreditation and evaluation standards as well as multiple policies and methods. This section presents findings with respect to the three research questions.

RQ1: ways of building internal quality assurance

The manner in which universities build internal quality assurance systems differs by institution, but the predominant initiative (90%) for building internal quality assurance involves developing institutional committees to improve teaching and learning, followed by faculty development (70%) to improve instruction and class management, as well as information and communications technology (ICT) and database systems (60%) to track and manage student academic information (Figure 1). About half stated that they had developed internal partnerships in academic programmes, units or offices and the university central office, to make institutional internal quality assurance function effectively. A major challenge to activating internal quality assurance in an institution is how multiple sectors with different layers (university, programme and classroom) and missions and targets (academic affairs, evaluation and student affairs) within the same institution collaborate with each other.

The underlying idea of an internal quality assurance is that the university has an initial responsibility to assure and improve its quality. While Japanese universities demonstrate a certain initiative guided by NIAD-QE (namely implementation of an institutional committee or faculty development), they show a wide range of their own efforts to build internal quality assurance (database/ICT systems, self-evaluation and external programme accreditation.
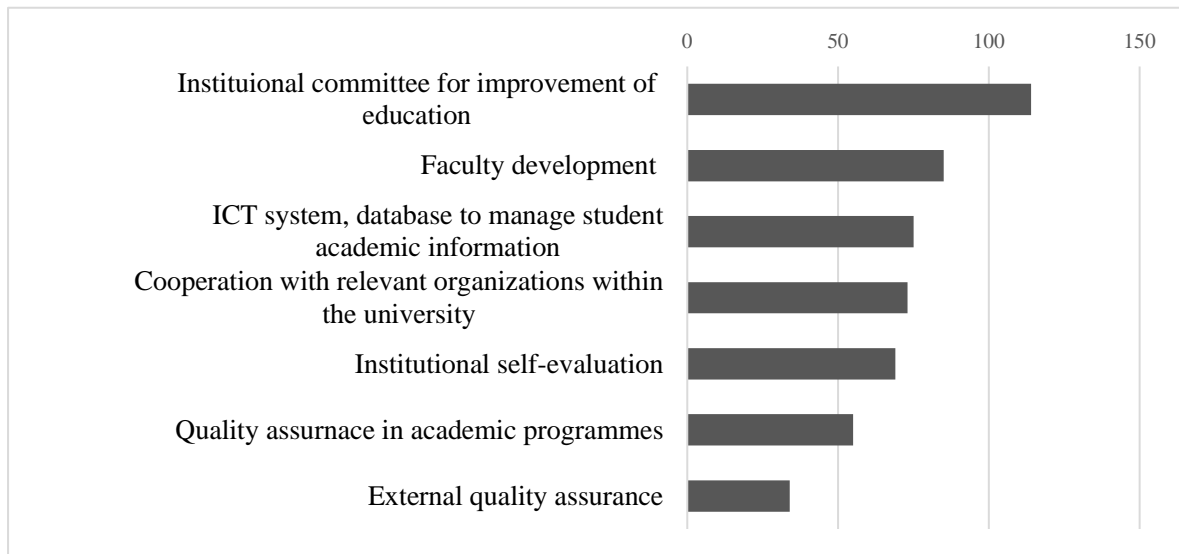
Figure 1. Japanese university initiatives to build internal quality assurance system through self-evaluation (n=124)

RQ2: learning outcome assessments under internal quality assurance

Assessing learning outcomes has become a common activity in today's universities. However, it remains a challenge to apply the assessment results to lead to further improvement, which eventually connects to an effective internal quality assurance mechanism. NIAD-QE asks universities in their self-evaluation to demonstrate what assessment tools they apply in the process of internal quality assurance. The result suggests that Japanese universities implement multiple methods when assessing learning outcomes to build their internal quality assurance (Figure 2). Course evaluation is a predominant indicator (61%). After receiving feedback from students about teaching performance in class, lecturers revised and improved on teaching content or methods used in the course for the following year. At some universities, the evaluation results are not only disseminated to teaching staff but also to education programme directors and the university internal database, to which colleagues, students and administrators can refer. Surveys for first-year students, graduates, alumni and employers are also frequently conducted to ascertain student learning outcomes as part of the internal quality assurance implementation process.

It is challenging to define and select effective assessment methods for understanding what outcomes students have acquired. Although all Japanese universities have already defined their expected learning outcomes under the regulations, there is still some confusion about the methods used to measure them.
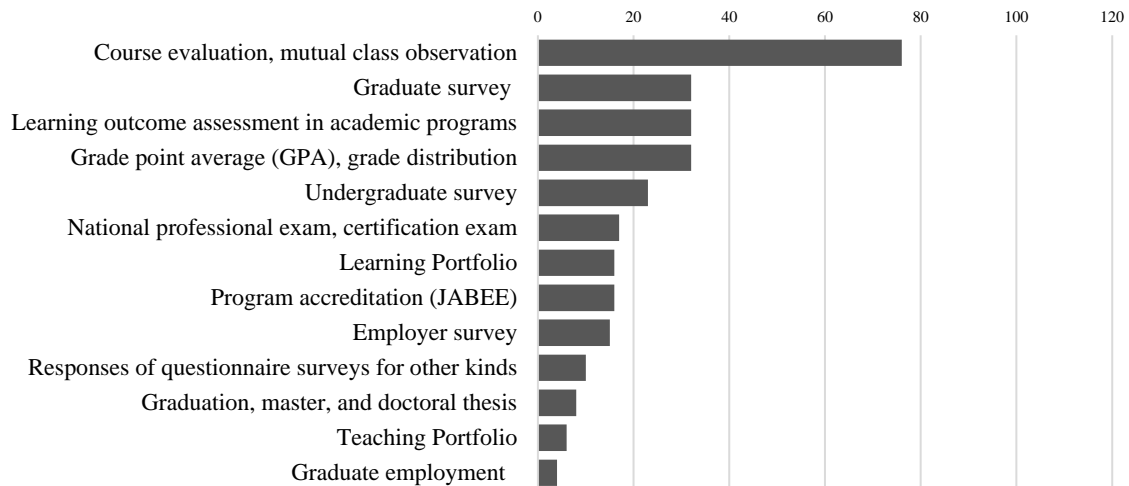
Figure 2. Japanese University initiatives regarding assessing learning outcomes in the process of internal quality assurance through self-evaluation (n=124)

RQ3: university's views about internal quality assurance in relation to learning outcome assessments

The term 'internal quality assurance' presumes the university's responsibility to define and assess relevant competencies in Japan. It aims to cultivate in students, design assessment methods or tools to identify what the graduates obtained and reflect upon, and apply, results to lead improvements. Internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments seem to have theoretically been discussed as one integrated concept in existing documents (BPMC, 2003; ENQA *et al*., 2015) but their relationship has not been clearly identified. RQ3 aims to investigate how universities perceive internal quality assurance in relation to learning outcome assessments. Overall, the interviewed academics and senior administrators recognised the interrelations between the two activities, yet showed following four different patterns of expressions: 1) learning outcomes assessment and internal quality assurance are *simultaneous* tasks, 2) internal quality assurance is the *purpose* and learning outcome assessment is a *means* of achieving the objective, 3) the tasks of learning outcome assessments and internal quality assurance should be decoupled and 4) the cognition of internal quality assurance as *supply* (assessment) and *demand* (outcomes).

Perspective 1): internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessment as simultaneous tasks

This the theoretical perspective suggests that internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessment cannot be separated. In the case of the Japanese, one interviewee stated that 'both concepts are closely linked and nearly equal' (University I, administrator) and another remarked that, 'because the two cannot be separated, both tasks are proceeding at the

same time. If either one is missing, it would not work' (University E, administrator). This *simultaneous* perspective presents learning outcome assessments and internal quality assurance as integral parts of the same process. Some interviewees in Japan mentioned that these two can be reformed simultaneously, and eventually integrated.

Perspective 2): internal quality assurance as purpose and learning outcome assessment as means

In this pattern, developing internal quality assurance comes first. The interviewees claimed that internal quality assurance is a 'purpose' and learning outcome assessment is a 'means' to achieve that purpose. Under this concept, internal quality assurance is perceived as a core or goal, and learning outcome assessments as the support for achieving that goal. The interviewees from Japanese universities said:

> Internal quality assurance is the purpose, while learning outcome assessment is the means. Internal quality assurance is management itself and we implement the assessment of learning outcomes to examine whether management is effective. (University F, academic)

> Internal quality assurance comes first; then, we must develop learning outcome assessments to measure it. However, in the actual process, we tend to apply assessment tools such as GPA that are easily arranged. Then, we sometimes get confused about why we are measuring it. (University A, administrator)

This purpose-and-means perspective highlights a typical problem with understanding internal quality assurance. Since internal quality assurance has become a government regulation or accreditation requirement, universities tend to see building an internal quality assurance system itself as a goal. This pattern possibly risks losing the original intention of helping universities improve quality.

Perspective 3): learning outcome assessment and internal quality assurance as decoupling tasks

This decoupling perspective indicates that internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments are understood or tackled independently from each other. The two concepts are understood separately and must be accorded independent missions even if they are simultaneously conducted on the same timeline. In Japan, this perspective implies the fragmentation of institutional management. In other words, within the university, functions and mission, even physical location and communication between learning outcome assessment and internal quality assurance are decoupled. Constituents within the university are unaware that learning outcome assessments and internal quality assurance are linked.

When they work either for accreditation or teaching and learning, in reality, they perceive they are working on two separated things. (University H, academic)

The quality assurance or institutional research office generally treats learning outcome assessment results as just data that must be submitted for accreditation, without any attempt to apply the outcomes to the actual improvement of student learning. The teaching and learning office, programme or department meanwhile endeavours to use the learning outcome data to develop curricula and to improve teaching and learning. In reality, these offices have independent missions and do not always work together or understand the correlations between internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments. internal quality assurance mechanisms. Universities found it difficult to apply learning outcomes assessment to the actual practice of their internal quality assurance process.

Perspective 4): internal quality assurance as supply (assessment) and demand (outcomes)

This final pattern avers that intended learning outcomes occur first as a goal (demand) that a university or programme needs to achieve. Based on this demand, learning outcome assessment and its feedback is needed as 'supply'. Then internal quality assurance follows, with the expectation of functioning to meet the goal. The supply-and-demand relationship eventually develops an internal quality assurance mechanism.

The assessment of learning outcomes and internal quality assurance are part of the relationship of supply and demand. In a word, because there is a need, an assessment of learning outcomes occurs. Since the data regarding the assessment of learning outcomes must be timely, it is periodically guaranteed by internal quality assurance. (University B, academic)

This supply and demand perspective can provoke discussion on why universities need to develop internal quality assurance, which is probably because the university wants to improve quality of education or student learning outcomes, not because building internal quality assurance is required externally.

Conclusion and discussion

Higher education reforms in Japan have initiated a shift towards the enhanced autonomy of higher education institutions by encouraging them to define their own learning outcomes and develop strategic plans to enhance internal quality assurance. Yet, this study found that the construction of internal quality assurance systems and learning outcome assessments are tightly constrained. Through its findings on how universities build internal

quality assurance, what learning outcome assessments are embedded in internal quality assurance mechanisms, and how universities perceive the associations between internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments, this study evidenced that university academics and administrators display diverse perspectives in conducting their quality assurance activities and face the dilemmas of following regulations or emphasising autonomy.

Government regulation or autonomy?

To enhance universities' autonomy, the government and quality assurance agency have emphasised how important it is for each university to define and assess its expected learning outcomes, eventually promoting its own internal quality assurance mechanism. The activation of an internal quality assurance system has to come from within for it to be successful. Although the idea is commonly understood, it remains a challenge to take action in reality. While promoting university autonomy, government regulated defining learning outcomes by proposing reference frameworks, as called 'diploma policy' in Japan. By now, all Japanese universities have already defined their expected learning outcomes on their own and university self-evaluation reports demonstrated their efforts to implement a wider range of assessment tools beyond accreditation requirements. Yet, there remains some confusion about the methods used to measure what students actually learned, and the internal quality assurance system in Japan is still highly regulated by the government as well as QA agency.

Actors' roles in translation of quality

Stensaker (2007) contends that the concept *translation* accords a more realistic understanding than the term 'implementation' in describing the processes that occur when ideas are put into practice in higher education institutions. As described earlier, translation denotes the association of quality assurance to a particular context along with its values, norms and cultures. Elken and Stensaker's (2018) 'quality work' viewpoint discusses how actors in the institution still have major influence over their own work. This study found that developing internal quality assurance and learning outcome assessments involved the divergent intentionality of actors in institutions: the interviewed academics and senior administrators engaged in quality assurance activities in Japan demonstrated diverse perspectives regarding the ways in which internal quality assurance systems relate to learning outcome assessments.

While universities have tackled building internal quality assurance and assessing learning outcomes under the governmental framework, the perspectives towards 'quality work' differ by actors among universities. As Elken and Stensaker (2018) posited, quality work is purposeful and intentional. This study demonstrates the variations or even confusions in universities' understanding regarding the functions of internal quality assurance. Is building internal quality assurance itself a goal for universities? Why should universities

work on that so hard? This study provokes discussion on why internal quality assurance should be built. If I borrow Lawrence *et al.*'s (2011) phrase, how actors translate the purpose of internal quality assurance would influence the institution's 'innovation, maintenance or disruption'.

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