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Nationwide Innovation in Higher Education and The Reform for General Education at Nagasaki University

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1. Introduction

Even though changes are necessary for all organizations over time, nationwide innovation in Japanese higher education in 1991 is still undergoing uncertainty, while making its impact. It can be considered a kind of revolution, because it aims at the decentralization of educational administration in a culture where centralization is generally common.

In 1991 the Education Ministry made a change in their policy, allowing colleges to liberalize, diversify, and individualize themselves, and as a result, the requirements for chartering and accreditation were changed into guidelines.

Although one of the characteristics of Japanese education has been the Ministry's strong degree of control and supervision, each college or university was endowed with a certain level of freedom in designing their own curriculum according to their individual educational policies. However, there is somewhat of a contradiction in this change because it was a top-down innovation, which encouraged a bottom-up decision making system.

In response to this, each school sought to improve their system, and began to carry out internal inspections and evaluations. Among others, ameliorating general education (abbreviated as GE) for the first two years in college became the biggest issue of the reform, that is, combining GE and specialized subjects in the third and the fourth years instead of concentrating on general subjects only for the first two years. Nevertheless, even after ten years the integration still does not work well. Some colleges are seeking more changes in their organization and curriculum, which means there

are still persistent problems in GE.

This essay will analyse the process of this innovation according to the model of Everard and Morris (1996), and try to find the reasons for the difficulties in implementation. In the first part, the general situation in Japanese higher education will be examined to provide a background, and for the second part, a case study comparing Nagasaki University with that of Carleton, an American liberal arts college, will follow.

2. Circumstances

2.1. Changes in higher education in Japan: why was it necessary?

The Japanese Education Ministry (its present name is 'The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology') set up the official requirements for the establishment of colleges and universities in 1956. Because they were given the two functions of chartering schools and approving their accreditation, they began to regulate, and have continued to do so, all areas of higher education such as the curriculum, faculties, and facilities. Many amendments have been made since then; however, the original requirements remain the most important and basic set of laws in education.

Everard and Morris (1996) argue that to draw a clear picture of what the change will mean for the people concerned is essential for the success of any innovation, but in the case of the new decentralization, it seemed difficult to understand the Ministry's intentions explicitly. The procedures were not clearly described in this new reform. It was partly because the

interests of different institutions were at the stake, and partly because the Ministry encouraged a bottom-up reform of each school.

As a result, many study meetings were held nationwide to try to understand what the Ministry actually expected them to do. Colleges observed each other's behavior to see what other schools would do in response to the innovation. Changes seemed difficult since the Ministry was the major stakeholder who would allocate the budget on the basis of an evaluation according to the degree of reform.

Amano (1999) mentions three main reasons for the innovation:

- 1) The most important reason for the change was that the number of students was expected to decrease rapidly in the near future after a quick expansion. A decline in the population of 18-year-old students was threatening the management of colleges. Schools needed more freedom to give their education an originality that would attract students;
- 2) The deregulation of the education system was discussed as a way of vitalizing the economy from the mid-80s onwards;
- 3) Deterioration in the quality of research continues to be regarded as a national crisis. From the 70s the Ministry adopted an egalitarian policy in distributing its research budget among universities. It decreed that graduate schools of prestigious universities should establish clear priorities to cope with competition from universities abroad.

2. 2. Problems of General Education

The deregulation caused a considerable impact, since it involved changes in the organization of higher education. The GE departments in most state universities were abolished and reorganized to other departments. In some universities, teachers in GE transferred to other faculties.

GE departments had been set up mainly in

state universities after World War II, and within the organization they became separated from specialized departments. However, it appears that this system did not work well especially after the 1970s, when the ratio of students who went on to higher education hardly exceeded 15% of their generation. This change moved higher education from the elite stage to the masses, after which the quality inevitably deteriorated greatly (Trow and Nybom 1991).

The problems in GE were caused partly because (1) the classes were too big to work efficiently; (2) universities failed to motivate the students, who wanted to relax after having studied hard to prepare for the rigorous college and university entrance examinations (3) the teachers were apt to be more interested in their own research and to minimize their efforts in teaching, since their achievements were mainly assessed by their research results; (4) few students belonged to the GE department, which made the teachers less interested in teaching; and (5) teachers in the GE department used to be totally separated from the specialized faculties making it almost impossible to foster closer connections between the two to cooperate for better education even in the same university. The fact that almost half of the people in society could study in higher education did contribute considerably to educating the workforce in Japan, nevertheless, innovations in GE had been a significant issue for a long time.

3. Problems which Remained

After discussions to create an original curriculum, most colleges reached the conclusion that GE was important as basic education. However, since the GE departments were abolished in many schools after deregulation, how was it possible and who was to be responsible for GE? Several committees were established to replace them, but could they carry out such functions as planning, coordinating, and organizing without enough authority to perform

their duties? These are some of the problems still remaining, which will be examined in the following case study.

3. 1. A Case Study: The Reform of General Education in Nagasaki University

In response to the reform, GE in Nagasaki University was changed into the Whole School GE program (abbreviated as WSGE) in 1994, and it fell to all the teaching staff of the university to teach the GE classes. Two years later the university compiled a report on WSGE, where the process of the innovation and its remaining problems revealed themselves, in addition to a statement by the staff of the former GE Department on the new curriculum (Inoue et al. 1996).

3. 1. 1. Policies

According to Inoue et al. (1996), the 'GE Study Committee,' which was established by the GE Department, discussed their curriculum design and organizational innovation, and made up a plan, which they called the 'Cooperative Teaching System of GE' in 1991. Since the university planned to abolish the GE Department and to establish the Faculty of Environmental Studies (abbreviated as FES), every teacher was expected to teach some GE subjects as long as GE was continued.

The following were some of the fundamental policies to activate GE (Inoue et al. 1996):

- 1) education in a student's specialized subject begins at entrance to the university as well as GE to integrate GE and his/her major and to fill the gap between them;
- 2) education in small-sized classes is considered important in order to avoid that of mass production and to promote communication between teachers and students;
- 3) contents of teaching in language classes are improved in response to criticism toward the traditional grammar-translation

only method;

- 4) information processing is regarded highly since its importance is expected to increase hereafter.

3. 1. 2. Implementation

Complying with these policies, the new curriculum was implemented in 1994. Among newly introduced subjects to attract students' interests were 'Introductory Course,' 'General Information Processing,' 'English Communication,' 'Comprehensive English,' and 'Subjects Related to Foreign Languages.'

As for the teaching staff, the new curriculum was based on a system in which the teachers and researchers were expected to suggest what particular subjects they could teach or preferred to teach. This was done by filling out an application form to be presented to the Reform Implementation Committee. The Committee then asked individual teachers to be in charge of certain classes.

However, the Committee did not have enough authority and some teachers did not submit their applications, so there was still an imbalance in the number of the classes which each teacher was teaching. The staff in the former GE Department were teaching more than one third of all the classes. After the department was abolished and the FES was established, it became clear that unless teachers in other faculties were more involved, it would be impossible to continue this system.

3. 1. 3. Evaluations

In 1996 the university compiled a report on the GE reform as a part of the whole schools' internal inspection and evaluation procedure (Nagasaki University 1996). They gave evaluation questionnaires to students and analysed the results. Generally, students admitted that the condition of GE was improved: (1) smaller size classes especially in language teaching, (2) up-to-date subjects to motivate students, and

(3) the study of major subjects from the first year. However, students' needs and teachers' intentions did not always agree with each other.

As for English classes, many students complained that there were considerable differences in content and in the level of difficulty among respective teachers of the same subject. The teachers had individual freedom in choosing textbooks and they were not required to adapt their level to that of other teachers. In GE, language classes accounted for almost half, that is, 400 language classes among a total of 900. It is necessary to better integrate students' needs into language teaching.

3. 1. 4. Necessity of a Second Reform

Inoue et al. (1996) expressed fear of a collapse of the system in the future if the university fails to develop the teachers' sense of responsibility toward GE. They argued that GE was an important part of higher education and that it should be guaranteed institutionally by setting up a suitable organization to maintain this principle.

In 2000, the university proposed a plan for a second reform, and in 2002 an organization called the Educational Function Development Center will be established to be in charge of WSGE. At the same time, the university is trying to decrease the required credits for GE from 44 (in Faculty of Environmental Studies, in other departments from 30 to 48 credits are compulsory at the moment) to 30 units. Some GE units will be transferred to specialized subjects in each department. This plan indicates that the Implementing Committee System did not work well in managing of GE. Instead of seeking for cooperation between GE and specialized education in each department, some credits in GE will be moved to specialized education.

It is realized that some kind of organization which is responsible for GE is necessary, and that it should be given enough authority so that it can assign teachers to certain classes. This may imply a return to the former system

of the GE department. In order to understand the problems clearly and avoid getting into a vicious circle, let's take a look at an American college as a potential model for GE.

4. Liberal Arts Education in an American College

In the report on his teaching in the FES, Tamura (2000) admires Carleton College, where he studied for two years as a part of his training given by the Foreign Ministry, as a successful and ideal example of liberal arts education. Carleton College, established in 1866, is a liberal arts college in Minnesota with 1,858 students.

With Tamura's mediation, Carleton College and the FES had a cross-cultural seminar in Nagasaki on July 6, 2001. Through Tamura's report and Prof. Carpenter's speech (2001) in the seminar, the differences of liberal arts education between American and Japanese colleges became clear to some extent.

4. 1. Curriculum

According to Tamura (2000), the following points are advantages at Carleton College:

- 1) an intensive schedule for each subject, which has two 90-minute classes a week or three 60-minute classes;
- 2) small class size of 15 to 20 students maximum;
- 3) a limit of units which students can take during one term, restricting them to a maximum of 3 courses in a term;
- 4) a number of overseas study programs which contribute to enhancing students' motivation.

In foreign language courses American students usually have three 60-minute sessions with their teacher, and two 60-minute sessions with their teaching assistant (TA) in a week, which means that every day students have a language lesson during a term of 10 weeks. In contrast, freshmen in the FES take two English courses,

Comprehensive English and English Communication, in a semester of 15 weeks (which includes one week for an examination), but they have only one 90-minute session a week for each course. Also, there is no consultation between teachers of the two English classes.

Figure 1. Language Classes in Carleton College and FES in Nagasaki University

Foreign Language Classes in Carleton College (Tamura 2000)

each week	10 weeks
Three 60-minute lessons with a teacher	30 hours
Two 60-minute lessons with TA	20 hours
total	50 hours

English Classes in Nagasaki University GE (Course Guide 2001)

each week	14 weeks
One 90-minute lesson with a teacher (Comprehensive English)	21 hours
One 90-minute lesson with a teacher (English Communication)	21 hours
total	42 hours

Considering 50 hours in Carleton and 42 hours in Nagasaki, the difference of 8 hours seems fairly small at a first glance. However, in Carleton the duration of a course is 4 weeks shorter than Nagasaki, which means that Carleton's courses are very intensive. Intensive learning may be a key to success for learning languages because students have a class every day, and activities and exercises are organized under the guidance of a course teacher.

In Nagasaki there are usually 35 students in an English Communication class, 50 in a Comprehensive English class even after conditions were considerably improved by the reform, while there are only 17 students per class in Carleton. Therefore, language courses in

Carleton are fairly small-sized and highly concentrated.

In addition, if students were to join a study abroad program while learning a language, it would contribute much to heighten their motivation. Carleton's homepage says that about 67 per cent of their students take part in such programs (Carleton's homepage 2001). Judging from the intensive language courses and the efforts to stimulate students' interest, Carleton's curriculum offers an ideal environment for language acquisition.

As for other classes, students cannot take more than 3 courses; therefore, they can concentrate on their study by doing many reading assignments, writing reports, getting feedback and sometimes rewriting. Thus, they can internalize what they study more effectively compared to Japanese university students.

4. 2. The Context which Makes up Ideal Conditions

Carleton's education of high quality is made possible by 3 major factors: (1) affluent financing to implement intensive curriculum, (2) a flexible evaluation system on teachers' achievements, and (3) society's expectation towards liberal arts education for prospective leaders.

Carleton College takes a comprehensive fee method, covering tuition, room, board, and student activities for a year. For 2000-2001 the comprehensive fee totals \$29,340 (¥3,520,800) and it is allocated as follows:

Figure 2. Comprehensive Fee in Carleton College, 2000/2001 (Carleton Homepage 2001)

Tuition	\$24,240 (¥2,908,800)
	(Exchange rate at \$1.00=¥120)
Board and Room	\$4,950
Activity Fee	\$150
Sub-total	\$29,340 (¥3,520,800)
Total (4 years)	\$117,360 (¥14,083,200)
Total of tuition	\$96,960 (¥11,635,200)
	—①

In contrast, in Nagasaki University there are two categories of fees' tuition fees for each year, and an entrance fee which students pay once when they enter the school.

Figure 3. Tuitions in Nagasaki University (Ministerial ordinance regarding tuitions and other expenses in state schools in 1997)

For the 1 st year		
Tuition	¥496,800	(\$4,140)
Entrance Fee	¥277,000	(\$2,308)
Sub-total	¥773,800	(\$6,448)
For the 2 nd , 3 rd , and 4 th years		
Tuition	¥496,800	(\$4,140)
Total	¥2,264,200	(\$18,868) -②

From figures ① and ②, it is understood that Carleton's tuition fees are 5.14 times higher than those of Nagasaki University, and which shows why they can afford a more specialized study environment. The expenses in Japanese state universities are considerably low and students from any background are able to enter, while Carleton generally attracts students from the upper social class, who may join the elite in society.

In the case of Nagasaki University, the fees go directly to national revenues, and later the form of a budget from the Education Ministry, a certain amount is allocated to each school (Special Finance Law for State Schools in 1992). This is another way of regulation and control by the central government. In order to obtain high evaluation by rating papers from the Ministry, teachers are asked to concentrate on their research rather than education. In Carleton, contribution to education is evaluated equally with achievements in research (Carpenter 2001).

According to their homepage, Carleton is identified as one of the top twenty-five colleges in producing "leading business executives" in the Standard & Poor's (McGraw Hill) survey of the nation's major corporations. Furthermore, "in a 1995 U.S. News and World Report

survey, college presidents and provosts ranked Carleton number one among national liberal arts colleges in terms of 'an unusually strong commitment to undergraduate teaching.'" In America it seems to be generally accepted that the qualities necessary for success as a business executive can be cultivated through liberal arts education; "to think critically, to develop problem-solving abilities, and to adapt to change" (Carleton homepage 2001).

However, one of the weak points in American colleges is that excellent higher education is only for people who can afford it. In contrast, equal opportunities in education have been sought after and highly evaluated in Japan; therefore, it can be said that educational systems also reflect society's values as well as the content of education itself does.

5. Discussion

5.1. Problems in the Reform

The main focus of the reform in Nagasaki was the change in its organization. They tried to fill the gaps between GE and studies in specialized fields by reorganizing the teaching staff.

However, they have similar problems to before as cited by Goh regarding the conditions for change:

- 1) additional workloads – extra work for teachers in other faculties;
- 2) lack of 'ownership' for the staff especially in other faculties. (Goh 1999)

When the university adopted the Cooperative Teaching System of GE, this change involved teachers in other faculties having to take on additional workloads. Nevertheless, the university tried to do so without real consultation with them. This may be one of the reasons why they should take the Cooperative Teaching System of GE instead of prescribing the teaching of GE as a duty for all the teaching staff in the university.

Since the Committee was comprised of only the staff in the former GE Department, its

decision did not truly reflect the opinions of other faculties. When the committee announced its decisions in their newsletters, it seemed that the teachers in other faculties felt these decisions were being imposed on them. As Carless (1999) argues, this change became a kind of a top-down reform, and as a result, the change agents became fairly ineffective.

This is somewhat contradictory to the principles behind the Ministry's reform, which aimed at bottom-up innovation and also a wider variety of educational style. It was sometimes said that in reality there was the Ministry's strong guidance to reorganize the GE department. If so, colleges could not help it, and the Ministry would be to blame for accountability of their policy.

Inoue et al. (1996) emphasized the importance of cultivating the teachers' sense of responsibility, betterment of professional ethos and life style all of which should change gradually in accordance with society's expectations. Even if this is the case, it is also necessary to develop a more practical system based on the current circumstances.

5.2. A Suggestion to Introduce Carleton's Method

Although an American liberal arts education was used as a model for Japanese universities, the comparison with Carleton shows that they are in fact considerably different. In Japan the emphasis has been put on popularization of higher education. Therefore, it is very difficult to improve GE by reorganizing the teaching staff without providing sufficient conditions.

Japanese college education prevailed after World War II, and it should be noted that a workforce with a pretty advanced educational background enabled the society to move forward. It should be emphasized that it is a very strong point to provide higher education equally to the majority of society. Nevertheless, Japanese colleges failed in grasping the essence of American liberal arts education; that

is, giving students an opportunity to involve in class and internalize what they learned.

Now the second reform is being proposed, and more and more units in GE are absorbed into specialized education. As a result, each faculty is expected to develop its own curriculum by integrating GE into the original courses.

In designing GE in the FES, it is important to try to adopt Carleton's method to avoid a vicious circle: that is, (1) classes should be small, (2) an intensive teaching schedule using teaching assistants especially for language courses, where students can concentrate on their subjects, should be implemented, (3) proper evaluation of contribution to education should be made. These conditions will help students to involve more in class, to prepare by themselves, and to get feedback from the teachers, as Tamura (2000) pointed.

The FES's interdisciplinary research is regarded as the most important in approaching environmental issues and it has a goal of cultivating students' problem-solving abilities; therefore, Carleton's liberal arts education gives a good model. Improving GE is essential for cultivating students' wider views for environmental studies.

6. Conclusion

In Japan the whole education system had been traditionally controlled by the central government. After deregulation, each university has been making efforts to improve their education' for example, private universities have adopted the policy to attract students by ameliorating education. In contrast, state universities are lagging behind in the process of reorganizing GE, since the Ministry's ideas for the innovation were so vague that the reform was made all the more difficult.

In Nagasaki University, the improvement of GE had still some problems: the lack of 'ownership,' and a kind of a top-down change, and the voluntary teaching system. When the

second reform is put into practice in 2002, perhaps the Carleton College liberal arts education may give some suggestions even though the conditions here are fairly complicated.

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