# NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ENHANCEMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

*JUN OBA*

*Research Institute for Higher Education (RIHE),*
*Hiroshima University*

## ABSTRACT

In the course of massification of higher education in the 1990s and beyond, the Japanese government has continuously revised the regulatory framework of higher education and explored various measures to improve the quality and efficiency of university education. At the same time, higher education policy has been much influenced by the reform of government administration, based essentially on neoliberal ideology. Universities, encouraged by government policy, and in response to growing societal needs, have introduced diverse steps with a view to improving their strategies to evaluate, and enhance, student learning. This article in the first place summarises the relevant government policy and then addresses institutional efforts for improving student learning, including staff development, enhancement of diverse support services and encouragement of student participation. Finally, it discusses problems and challenges in student learning.

Keywords: Evaluation, quality assurance, staff development, student learning, student participation, student support

In Japan, in the 1990s and beyond, the percentage of students enrolling in higher education institutions (HEIs) (universities and junior colleges) increased, surpassing 50 per cent in 2005 – Trow's point of demarcation between mass and universal higher education (1974) – and rose to 55.3 per cent in 2008, from 36.3 per cent in 1990. At the same time, the number of universities increased from 507 to 765,[1] while the number of 18-year-olds diminished from 2.0 million to 1.2 million. As a result, today higher education has become much more accessible than in the 1980s and HEIs are admitting a more diversified student body – some of whom who are often completely unprepared for traditional university educational practices.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (Monbusho, the present MEXT – hereafter referred to as 'MEXT') responded to the change by: deregulating contents and delivery methods of university education, permitting universities to elaborate programmes on their own initiative to offer various subjects, and initially asked (but subsequently required) them to organise staff development activities with the aim of improving the quality of teaching. Meanwhile, MEXT has several times revised the qualifications required of academic staff as well as the university organisational frameworks so that institutions might recruit diverse professionals in various types of units. Moreover, MEXT has continuously sought to enhance university evaluation systems, and has promoted the development and dissemination of good practice. These measures have been implemented in line with neoliberal policies promoted by the government.

In universities, although many of the staff continue to work in traditional academic units (faculty, research institutes, etc.), some universities have brought together units to better respond to educational demands by offering interdisciplinary – often vocationally oriented – programmes. In addition, a number of universities now have specialised services that engage in various quality assurance or support activities, including academic staff development, evaluation of teaching, data collection and analysis of different learning outcomes, counselling, career development, and learning support for students (hereinafter, these units are referred to as 'academic support centres', or ASCs).

This article reviews, in the first place, changes in the regulatory framework and government policies concerning university education that affected student learning. In the second part, various institutional support activities for improving student learning are analysed in the light of recent surveys. Additionally, student participation is addressed. In conclusion, the problems and challenges in student learning are discussed.

## Changes in the regulatory framework and government policies concerning university education

This section summarises the changes in the regulatory framework of higher education and the government policies concerning university education since the 1990s with some historical reflections.

### *Deregulation of university education and measures for instructional improvement*

In 1991, based on a recommendation of the University Council (UC),[2] MEXT revised the regulation concerning the content of education programmes (Standards for the

Establishment of Universities, or SEU), aiming at stimulating an autonomous effort towards reform on the part of the university (Amano and Poole, 2005). Before this reform, course subjects taught at the undergraduate level were classified into four categories: liberal arts (including humanities, social sciences and natural sciences), specialised subject education, foreign languages (not less than two) and physical education and health. All of the universities organised their undergraduate education programmes based on these standards.

At the same time, the UC and its successor – the Central Council of Education (CCE) – have continuously exhorted academic staff to put much emphasis on teaching, and urged universities to organise staff development activities. Staff development was made compulsory for every institution in 1999, for all academic staff at the graduate level in 2007, and has been required at the undergraduate level since 2008.

Towards the end of the 1990s, universities installed a number of pedagogical tools to improve the learning environment for students and to assure the quality of education in order to guarantee graduate employment opportunities, in other words to assure their employability. Among the tools introduced during this period – mostly imported from the US – were the preparation and presentation of syllabi, semesterisation of year-long subjects, assignation of teaching assistants, and evaluation of classes by students. In addition, programmes that were considered likely to be immediately useful in the business world, such as ICTs, foreign languages and career education (aimed at developing students' career perspectives), were enhanced.

The 2000 UC report 'Higher Education Required in the Age of Globalisation' criticised university education as being still based principally on individual disciplines, and called for the reorganisation of educational courses so that they might offer various career perspectives and add value to students. The report also recommended using competitive funds as a tool to enhance education in universities. From 2003 to 2004 MEXT launched two programmes for supporting instructional improvement – 'Support programme for distinctive university education' and 'Support programme for initiatives serving contemporary educational needs', to promote development and dissemination of good practices in university education. They were open to all universities on a competitive basis.

The question remains, however, to what degree such reforms have succeeded in changing the quality of a university education. Amano and Poole (2005) question whether the quality of education that students are receiving has actually improved by international standards.

### Revision of the regulation governing academic staff employment

Regulation governing the employment of academic staff has been repeatedly revised so that universities may modernise and diversify their instruction (Oba, forthcoming). The UC recommended in 1994, in its report entitled 'Improvement of Teaching Staff Employment Procedures', that universities should put much more importance on teaching ability when recruiting staff. The report also required that universities should promote employing people with diverse backgrounds and experience, including non-academics, women and foreigners.

These requirements were reiterated in a series of recommendations of the council.[3] In 2001, by a revision of the SEU, MEXT amended the selection criteria of staff, replacing 'capability to teach and conduct research' by 'capability to teach, suited

for assuming charge of university education'. Thus, the description referring to the capability to conduct research was deleted. In addition, the 1998 UC report called for developing extracurricular activities and student support services in universities.

These changes have contributed to developing not only interdisciplinary vocational courses but also to developing diverse support activities, often offered by specialist ASCs.

## Development of student support services

In Japanese universities, student support services have generally been understaffed or have drawn little attention from senior administrators, particularly compared with US universities. Historically, after the war, the American concept of student personnel services (SPS) was introduced to Japan (Lloyd, 1953), and its development was studied in the Student Welfare Council of MEXT. In 1958 the council established a report, 'Organisation of Student Services in Universities and Improvement of Their Administration', which proposed professionalisation of SPS staff and other measures. However, being incompatible with the Japanese employment system and with the Japanese university culture, this proposal did not receive much support. The concept of SPS was practically abandoned towards the end of the 1960s, at a time of active student movements.

However, massification of higher education revived the discussion of student support services. In 2000, a ministerial study group on student learning established a report entitled 'Enrichment of Student Life in Universities – Development of Universities in Support of Students' (Hironaka Report). The report exhorted university administrators and other staff to switch their viewpoint from 'teacher-centred university' to 'student-centred university'. This proposal was in line with a paradigm shift from 'teaching' to 'learning', suggested by Barr and Tagg (1995). To promote this ideal, the report recommended collaboration between academic and non-academic staff, professionalisation of non-academic staff in student services, recruitment of experts (counsellors, career advisers, etc.) from outside the university, and so on.

With regard to national universities, traditionally regarded as dominantly research-oriented and as the least student-centred group of institutions among three sectors (national, local public and private), the National University Corporation Law, promulgated in 2003, put student support services concerning both academic and social student life in second place among the corporations' activities, after establishment and management of a national university and before other items of importance. In 2007, MEXT launched a new competitive funding programme, 'Student support programme in response to new societal needs' to develop student support services in universities. More recently, the 2008 CCE report 'Restructuring of Undergraduate Education' placed considerable emphasis on learning outcomes, and stressed the importance of extracurricular activities and student support services for student learning.

## Enhancement of evaluation

In the 1990s, MEXT successively reinforced its requirement for universities to be involved in internal evaluation activities. Based on the 1991 UC report, MEXT exhorted every university to organise self-evaluation activities. Self-evaluation was made compulsory in 1999. Although almost all universities did introduce such

review practices, as the 2002 report of the CCE 'Building a New System to Ensure the Quality of Universities' pointed out, self-evaluation often lacked transparency and objectivity.

On the other hand, third-party assessment had begun in the form of mutual evaluation from 1947 when the Japanese University Accreditation Association (JUAA) was set up by some universities. However, its evaluation activities, lacking a direct link with policy decisions (recognition of establishment, budget allocation, etc.), and being limited to member institutions, had little impact on university education. The 1998 UC report, recognising problems relating to self-evaluation and the limit of the JUAA accreditation, called for establishing an across the board, multifactorial, third-party evaluation system.

In 2000, MEXT established a National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE), especially for evaluating national universities and developing evaluation methods. In 2004, a new third-party evaluation system – the certified evaluation system – was introduced: all the universities have now to be institutionally evaluated every seven years by one of the accreditation agencies, recognised by MEXT. Three agencies – JUAA, NIAD-UE and JIHEE (Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation) – have been recognised for these purposes.

National universities, which were incorporated in 2004, should additionally be evaluated by the evaluation committee of MEXT after each period of mid-term plan (MTG/MTP). The first term of the MTG/MTP will expire in March 2010. In the meantime, national universities have to submit their self-evaluation reports to the evaluation committee, which examines them and presents good practices to guide national universities' activities.

All these evaluation measures placed a great deal of emphasis on educational quality: they ask the HEIs if they have organised learning enhancement activities, including relevant staff development activities and evaluation of teaching by students. The effectiveness of these measures remains in question: to date, many have identified numerous issues, including lack of objective evaluation criteria and heavy preparation work for evaluation.

## Institutional efforts for improving student learning

This section addresses issues associated with staff development, ASCs, student support and student participation.

### Staff development and staff attitude towards teaching

In Japan, until recently, most universities functioned on the Humboldtian model, a model that was dominant in the former imperial universities, and prevailed after the war in almost all universities in spite of the reform of the entire higher education system on the American model. As a result, academic staff continued to assign greater importance to research rather than teaching. According to an international survey (Carnegie Survey) carried out in 1992–1993 in 14 countries, Japan was classified as one of the countries where staff had the least predilection for teaching in favour of research (Arimoto and Ehara, 1996).

For the government, such a situation in universities had to be altered rapidly. The 1998 UC report called for a greater emphasis on teaching ability when recruiting

and promoting staff. After a series of policies that had promoted education, including staff development, according to a MEXT survey[4] 86 per cent of the universities reported that they had introduced systematically organised staff development activities in 2006.

During this period of reform, the attitude of Japanese academic staff seems to have changed to a certain extent. According to a longitudinal study (RIHE, 2004), based on two surveys carried out in 1989 and 2003 among academic staff, the ratio of those considering teaching as very important increased sharply over that period from 35.5 per cent to 59.7 per cent (Figure 1). In the same study, the importance of research diminished: those considering research as very important fell from 59.7 per cent to 35.5 per cent.[5]

## Academic support centres (ASCs)

Some universities, especially larger national universities, have developed centres specialising in diverse quality assurance or support activities (including student support services), such as learning support centres, centres for career education, and diverse research centres for teaching improvement. According to a survey conducted in 2006 (RIHE, 2007), such ASCs have been established in almost two-thirds of universities (including centres that are planned to be established). These centres are more developed in national universities than in local public and private universities (Figure 2), and particularly well-developed in large comprehensive and multidisciplinary universities. Among functions addressed by the survey, academic staff development is the most developed: including centres that are planned to be established, 97 per cent of the universities have specialised services for this function (Figure 3).

With respect to the effectiveness of the ASCs, according to presidents they are relatively poorly evaluated in local public universities in comparison with those in national and private universities (except for general education) (Figure 4). The reason for this is not clear, but may be attributed to the fact that local public universities, which are closer to the public authority and tax-payers than others, are more likely to be held accountable by the local authority for the quality of their offerings.[6] Among the functions studied in the survey, staff development activities are most appreciated
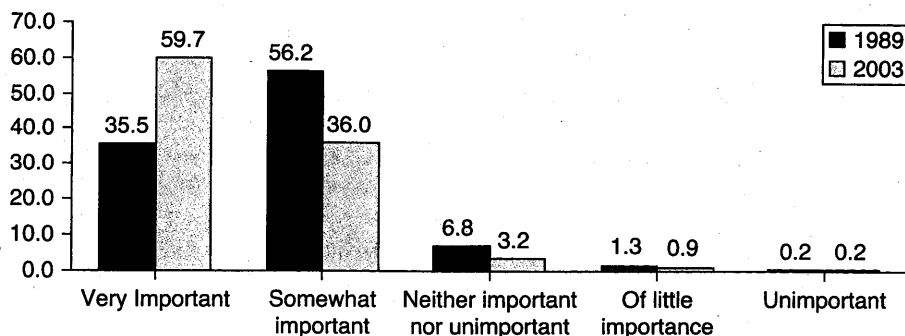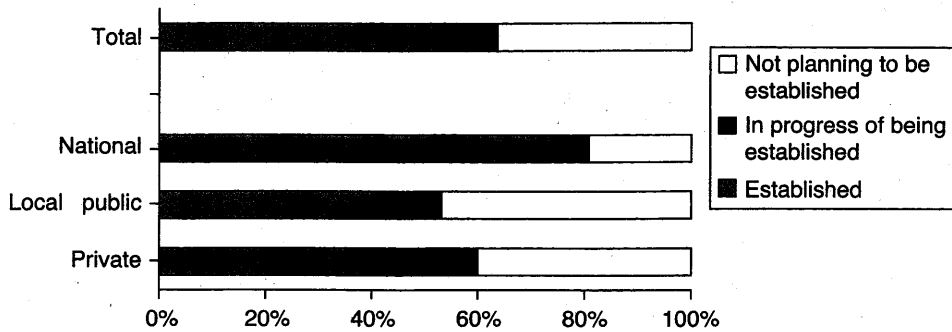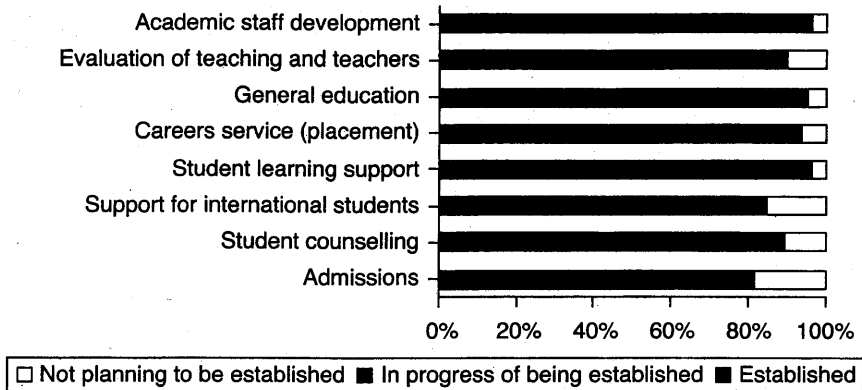
**Figure 1**

**Figure 2**
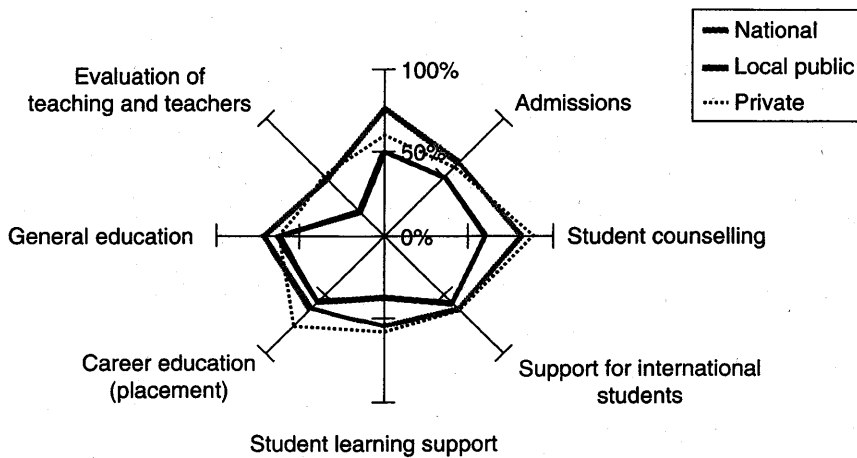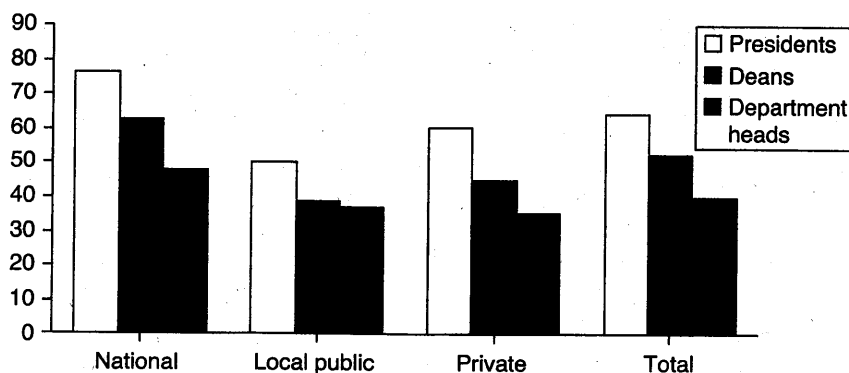


**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

**Figure 5**



by presidents in national universities, whilst career education (placement) is most appreciated in private universities. However, evaluations are quite divergent amongst different groups of decision-makers. The satisfaction rates of presidents are always superior to those of department heads, and those of deans are generally situated somewhere in the middle. It is concerning academic staff development, strongly promoted by MEXT, that the gap between the views of presidents and those of department heads is the largest (65 per cent against 40 per cent) (Figure 5). After seeing these results, there seems to be little consensus on the effectiveness of the centres on each campus, which may constitute a source of tension between presidencies and basic academic units.

## Student support services

Contemporary universities, serving mass higher education markets, find themselves delivering complex, broadly-based projects such as student support and welfare (Whitchurch, 2004). In Japan as well, in accordance with the diversification of students, the need for student support services has been increasingly recognised in universities (Study group on the development of student counselling services in universities, 2007). In particular, changes in the student body have led to an increased demand for counselling. According to a survey carried out in 2005 (JASSO, 2006), 61.7 per cent of the universities reported that the number of counselling visits of undergraduate students had increased over the past five years, against 2.7 per cent reporting a decrease (Figure 6). In particular, counselling for interpersonal relations, mental disorder and psychological issues (identity, self-control, etc.) has sharply increased.

In order to adapt to an increasing need for counselling and other student support services, universities have developed student support programmes and specialised student support services. In Yamagata University, for example, one faculty adviser was appointed for every 20 students, and academic advisers were placed in an advising centre offering a 'YU supporting system', which dealt with about 4,000 cases of consultation in FY 2004. In Hiroshima University, the placement centre was replaced by a career development centre, newly staffed by experts in career designing. Some universities have developed peer support systems, in which students give support
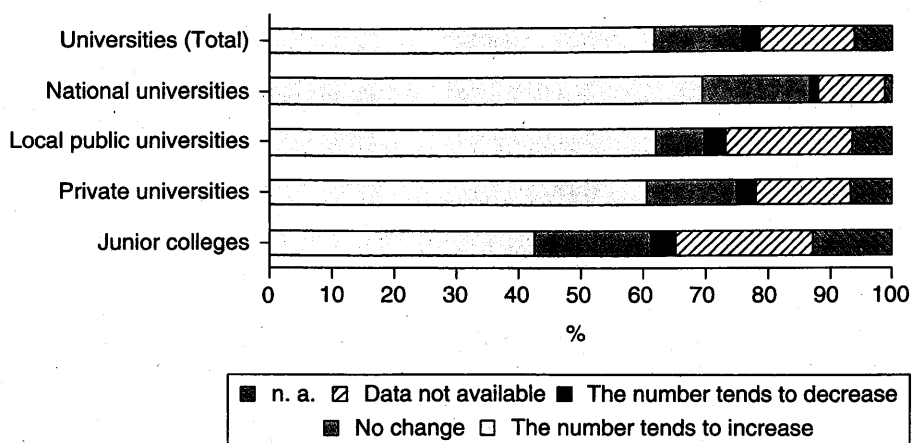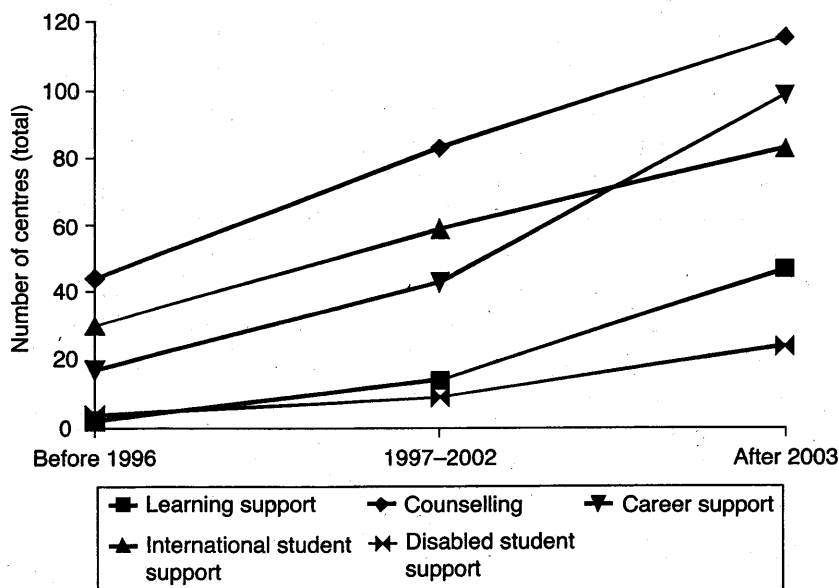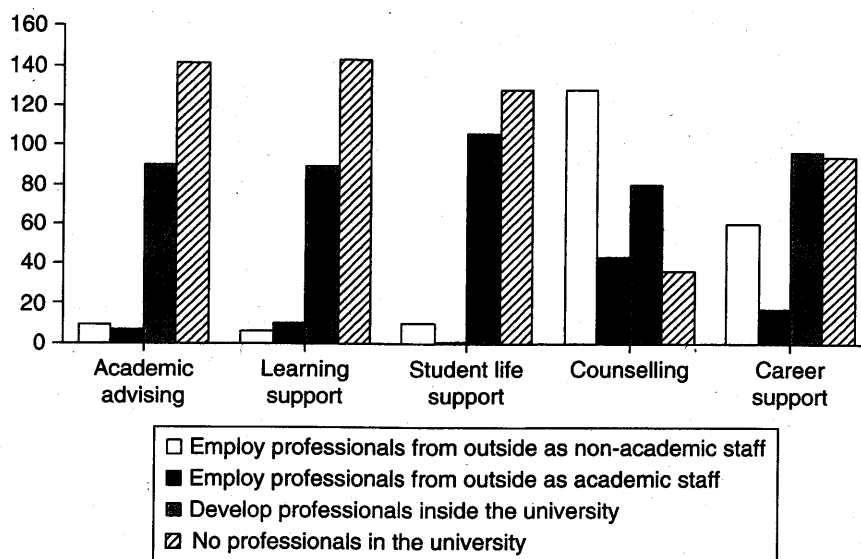
**Figure 6**



Universities (Total)
National universities
Local public universities
Private universities
Junior colleges

%

■ n. a.  ▨ Data not available  ■ The number tends to decrease
▨ No change  □ The number tends to increase

**Figure 7**



Before 1996          1997–2002          After 2003

-■- Learning support    -◆- Counselling    -▼- Career support
-▲- International student  -✕- Disabled student
    support               support

to each other. In 2005, 12.9 per cent of universities put such systems into practice (JASSO, 2006).

Specialised student support services have rapidly developed in recent years. According to a survey carried out in 2007 (Onuki, 2009), nearly half of the universities have established centres for counselling and centres for career support respectively (Figure 7). In particular, the recent development of centres for career support is remarkable. Professionalisation of student support services is recognisable in terms of staff employment. It is chiefly in the area of counselling, and to a lesser extent

**Figure 8**



Categories (x-axis): Academic advising, Learning support, Student life support, Counselling, Career support

Legend:
- ☐ Employ professionals from outside as non-academic staff
- ■ Employ professionals from outside as academic staff
- ▦ Develop professionals inside the university
- ▨ No professionals in the university

in the area of career support, that professional staff have been employed (Figure 8). In the area of counselling, most of the professionals are appointed from outside the university. It should be noted that, particularly in both of the above-mentioned areas, some staff members have been employed as academic staff, which may have been blurring traditional division between academic and non-academic tasks.

## Student participation

In the course of recent reforms, particularly in national universities, the governance structure has been restructured. The locus of authority is centred on the president and a handful of senior level administrators – in the views of many, the input and influence of academic staff have significantly decreased. In contrast with a decline in the authority of academic staff, students are increasingly involved in decision-making. Traditionally in Japan, students were not regarded as full members in the campus community, and rarely represented themselves in a decision-making process at any level, whereas in European countries and the US students gained a role in the governance structures of many universities, although very seldom as a major influence in these structures (Altbach, 1998).

However, today student participation, in particular that in quality assurance activities, is regarded as a necessary step, as shown in the OECD-UNESCO guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education (OECD, 2005), although some practices, such as evaluation of teaching by students, raise a whole new set of issues. The European standards for quality assurance (ENQA, 2005) provide for involvement of students in quality assurance in institutions and third-party evaluation. In Japan, in spite of the lack of relevant policy framework, in some universities students are found as full members on evaluation committees and other decision-making bodies. In Okayama University, for example, students and academic/non-academic staff

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9**
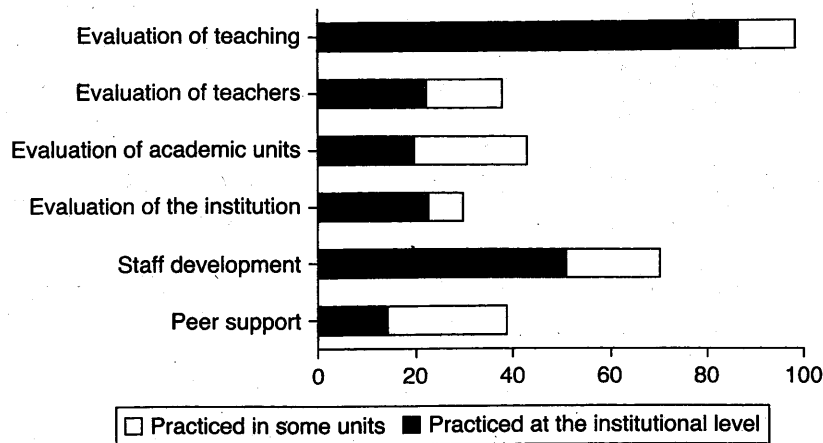
members sit in conjointly on a Student-Staff Committee on Educational Improvement, where students hold a majority. The committee has proceeded with diverse educational improvement activities largely inspired by students, including the development of new courses and the improvement of student questionnaires on teaching.

According to a survey (RIHE, 2007), students are involved in evaluating instruction in almost all national universities and participate in staff development activities in more than half of the universities, and in more than 70 per cent if partial implementation (that is limited to some units) is included (Figure 9). But in other activities addressed in the survey, student participation remains confined to a limited number of universities: participation rates are no more than a quarter at the institutional level, and even including partial participation, the rates do not reach 50 per cent.

## Conclusion

Like many other countries, Japan has experienced a significant quantitative expansion of the higher education system in the last decades. Consequently its student body has diversified and, increasingly, appears unprepared for university education. On the other hand, over the same period of time, technology, globalisation, and competition have caused the ground to shift under higher education worldwide (Green *et al.*, 2002); universities have seen their missions expand beyond their core functions of teaching, research and service. In response, MEXT has revised requirements for academic staff, extended universities' discretion over organisational structures and deregulated the university education framework with the objective of stimulating more diverse educational offerings. At the same time, MEXT has promoted evaluation, exhorted universities to enhance staff development and other educational improvement activities, and promoted the development and sharing of good practice.

Universities, as requested by MEXT, have systematically organised or enhanced staff development, self-evaluation and other activities aimed at guaranteeing student learning. The ministerial policy that has put emphasis on teaching may have changed

the attitude of academic staff but, as seen in the case of staff development promoted by specialised centres in universities, it may have created tensions between presidencies and basic academic units. Drawing from a nationwide survey of staff development in national universities, Arimoto (2007) concludes that staff development has not been effective thus far.

On the other hand, student support remains largely underdeveloped and lacks professionalisation (Onuki, 2009). However, amid a financial crisis, it is unlikely that universities will be prepared to allocate more resources to student support services. The US student support model, in which the field is highly professionalised, is not easily transposable to the Japanese system, mainly due to significant differences between the two countries in levels of investment in higher education.[7] Instead of professionalising staff, diverse collaboration – collaboration with academics, students, other universities, etc. – should be sought. Student participation, particularly in quality assurance activities, has been taken into consideration in only a small number of universities, and is still in the trial and error stage. In addition, to make student participation effective and helpful for university operation, students need to be specially prepared, as shown by different studies (Persson, 2004, and others).

Japanese universities have made significant efforts to respond to the diversification of the student body and growing societal needs, being pushed by changes of the regulatory framework and ministerial policies. Nevertheless, a number of problems remain unsolved. The 2008 CCE report pointed to many issues relating to student learning, including restructuring ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, improving the outcomes of students, and promoting collaboration among institutions, aimed at assuring the quality of education.

Finally, reform measures in recent years have been largely driven by market forces, promoted by neoliberal policies. This policy change has caused some important problems relating to the quality of education (Takizawa, 2008): the 2008 CCE report pointed to the limit of deregulatory policy with respect to higher education. More concerted and collaborative efforts, in which all the stakeholders including government, universities (management and staff), students, and industry, are needed to effectively enhance student learning.

## Notes

1. The number of junior colleges decreased from 593 to 417 in the same period of time. They are generally smaller institutions and their regression is not very significant in terms of enrolment number.
2. An advisory board to the Minister of Education founded in 1987 to deliberate on basic aspects of higher education. It was merged into the Central Council of Education (CCE) in 2001.
3. Notably 'A Vision of Universities in the 21st Century and Reform Measures' (1998), and the 2000 report (mentioned above).
4. 'Undertakings towards improving educational offerings in universities', released on 3 June 2008.
5. It may not be appropriate, though, to overestimate this difference. A preliminary report of the Japanese post-Carnegie survey carried out in 2007 asserts that there was no significant difference in the preference of staff between 1992 and 2007 (Daizen and Fukudome, 2009).
6. See Musselin (2005) for a comparison of staff employment between France and Germany.
7. In 2004, the total expenditure (public and private) on HEIs in the US amounted to 2.9 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), while the corresponding ratio was 1.3 per cent for Japan

(OECD, 2007). Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) spoke critically of a growing cost of higher education due to an increase in professional staff in American universities.

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