

Japanese Academic Leadership in Transition

A Tale of Failed Reform at the University of Tokyo

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Prologue

On July 1 of 2011 the Nikkei Shimbun, one of the most influential newspapers, reported in its front page that a major reform was going to take place at the University of Tokyo. The University's president announced that he would seek major alteration of the institution's academic calendar. It would accept student in the beginning of September, instead of April as had been the case for any schools and higher education institutions for years.

According to the article, the scheme of "Autumn Admission," as it was called, was primarily purported to promote international exchanges of students, both from and to Japan. It was also supposed to allow half a year for the Japanese students between graduation from high school and engagement in the study at the university. During this "gap" months, the students would be able to have various kind of experiences.

Because of its prominent status of the university in Japanese society, the announcement provoked considerable repercussions. The Minister of Education gave favorable comments on the initiative. Japan Business Federation announced its support for the reform. Newspapers and broadcasting media reported the initiative with generally favorable comments. It looked as if the whole society outside the university welcomed the attempt overwhelmingly.

Nonetheless, the attempt of reform was aborted after two years. The only change that the university achieved since then was the shift in the academic calendar from a semester system to a quarter system. In the spring of 2015, a new president was inaugurated, and he has shown no intention to revive the unsuccessful attempt.

The whole incident presents an interesting case for discussing "leadership" in Japanese higher education institutions. It was a rare case in which a president showed a distinctive intent of a major change in Japanese institutions of higher education. The society outside the university appeared to support the attempt overwhelmingly. And yet, it plunged into distinctive failure.

Reflecting on this incident, a few questions arise. What caused the president to choose the particular theme academic calendar, why did the society as a whole appear to support the initiative, and why did it have to fail? Above all, what does the incidence reveal with respect to the underlying problems in leadership and governance?

1. Academic Leadership

Fortifying leadership in higher education institutions has become one of the most salient thrusts in government reform agenda in Japan. The renewed interest on academic leadership is not limited to Japan. A cursory review reveals that there have been rising interests in academic leadership elsewhere in the world.

In the United States, management, governance and leadership have always been one of the major topics in the literature of higher education studies. But, since the turn of the century, there appear to be renewed interest in the topic as suggested by the number of books and articles published in recent years (Radley 2005, Bowen and Tobin, 2015, Gerber 2014, Ginsberg 2011, Mortimer and Sathre 2007, Tierney ed. 2004, Trachtenberg et al 2013). In the European countries, governance has been one of the most discussed topic in the field of higher education (Amaral et al eds. 2002, Amaral et al eds. 2003, Amaral et al eds. 2008, Braun et al eds. 1999, De Boer and File, 2009, Huisman 2009, Paradeise et al eds. 2009, Shattock 2014,).

One may suspect that the interests in governance and leadership appear to reflect two forces that seem to be working in sometimes contradicting directions.

One is the increasing importance of the role of higher education institutions as the society and economy seek for transformation in the increasingly competitive world. At the same time, the governments face financial stringency arising from welfare spending. The universities are pressed to cater to the social need and be efficient. Bailies (1996) typically argued that presidency should be given a greater power and the room for discretion over the management of higher education institutions.

On the other hand, the management of higher education institutions are criticized for sticking to the traditional model of collegial decision-making. The tradition dates back to the origin of the university as a guild (*universitas*) of scholars. In the beginning of the 19th century, it was fortified by the Humboldtian idea of freedom of research and learning. These beliefs and the associated practices of decision making at the department level have been accused to be the major factor to hinder accommodation of acute social needs.

From this viewpoint, it is natural to propose reforms in governance structure that prove greater power to the central administration of the university. In fact, there are various instances that the government and the society in general call for strengthening the leadership and power of the president.

Opposition to this trend come from beliefs and values of academic profession. Typically, the principle of shared governance stated by the AAUP had remained influential among academics. But it is not the only ground. The empirical works on the actual works of leadership, spearheaded by the classical work of Birnbaum (1992), revealed that leadership works in a very complicated settings of the university as a complex organization. It is not necessarily because of the sheer force of tradition that the professoriate takes parts in decision-making.

It is rather because the essential parts of the major function of the university, teaching and research, are primarily undertaken by individual faculty members. The critical role of faculty members in research is generally accepted. In teaching, the university as an organization assume greater role, by administrating student admission and by setting curriculum. Nonetheless, the teaching itself is left for faculty members. Therefore they are the ones that face the problems in teaching and students' learning. They are also the ones that practice teaching. In other words, the faculty members have the information on the problems of teaching, and they have the ultimate power in realizing reforms. On the other hand, the academic leaders have limited information about the problems of teaching, and the actual power to alter teaching is limited.

In fact, there are many incidences where university presidents fail to achieve their mission, or lose power or confidence in the institution. Even in such renowned higher education institutions, such as Harvard University, the president were terminated against their will (Bradley 2005). In other words, presidencies can be "derailed." (Trachtenberg et al., 2013).

From this perspective, the incidence at the University of Tokyo sketched above - the initiation of reform attempt by the president, and its subsequent dissipation - would provide an excellent ground to examine the problems in the governance of the Japanese universities, and the underlying structural issues.

In such an analysis it is important to bear in mind that the literature on university governance, from the classical work by to the recent ones such as that by Bowen and Tobin (2015), suggested "leadership" cannot be discussed without considering its context.

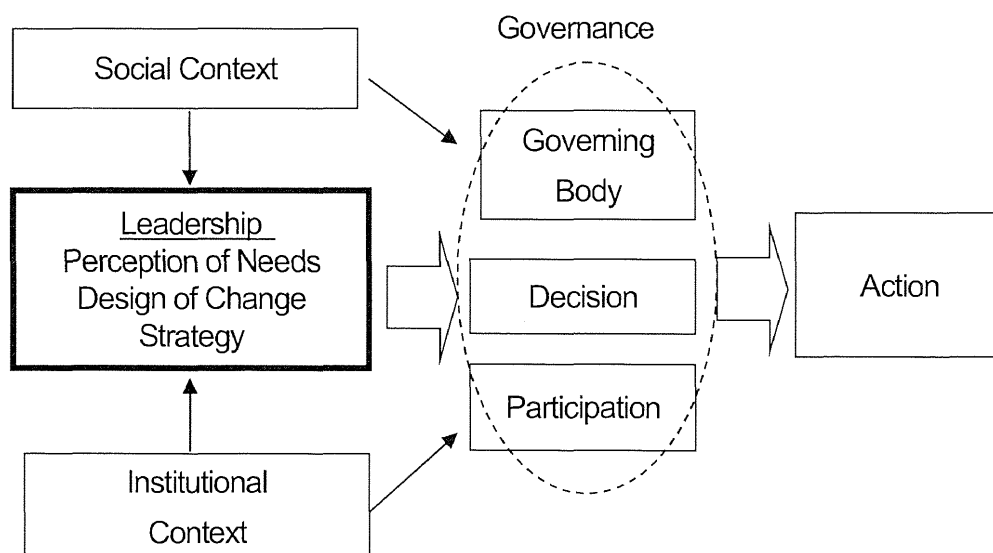


Figure 1. Leadership and Governance

For the present survey I set up a tentative framework of concepts relating leadership with other factors (Figure 1 below). In this framework, there are three phases through which leadership is formed, go through governance structure, and eventually brought into organizational action.

Leadership comprises three dimensions: perception of needs, design of change, and the strategy to implement the plan. It partly reflects the social needs on one hand, and the needs arising from inside the institution. That will be bring into organizational decision. In this process, the governing body has the formal power. Also the faculty of the institution influences the decision through formal and informal governance procedures. Finally, the decision is translated into concrete action.

In the following, I will first discuss the social and institutional contexts, design and strategy of change, its consequences and then the underlying problems in governance.

2. Social Contexts

In hindsight the incident of the University of Tokyo could not take place without the particular social environment at the time. Since the rapture of "bubble-economy" in early 1990s, Japanese economy had been suffering from plummeting economic growth rates. That was not merely an issue of stagnating economic growth, but it was a reflection of more fundamental and serious problem: the growth model that had supported the development of Japan's postwar growth had lost its momentum. Japan had yet to find an alternative mechanism of economic and social development, and in this Japanese society as a whole had to struggle. It appeared that the existing economic and social institutions were unable to generate necessary innovations.

Another aspect of the sense of impasse rose from the lingering pace of involvement in the trend of globalization. It was felt that, even though Japan had been successful in exporting goods, it fell far behind in participating in the growing corporate activities encompassing the world. Active involvement in internationalization appeared to be one of the crucial keys for further development.

In all of these aspects the society sought Japanese universities to play critical roles. It was felt that future Japan in the coming age of knowledge economy should be borne from universities. In particular, internationalization should be initiated from university given that they are educating the new generation. Universities had been accused to lag behind the changes in economy and society for a long time. But this time, it was inexplicably thought that universities could change if they so wished, when the corporate society was unable to change.

These factors as a whole constituted expectation on potential contribution of the universities, and at the same time, criticisms against its absence.

A policy induced in this environment was the incorporation of national universities. As of 2004, legal status national universities were transformed from that of a part of the organization of

national government into "National University Corporation." (Kaneko 2012) National University Corporation (NUC hereafter) is an independent entity under a virtual contract with the government. The change was partly prompted by political need to reduce the size of government employees, as promised in policy platforms of the incumbent government. Nonetheless, the formal rationale for the reform lied in a neo-liberal argument that the independence would enhance reforms in national universities for increased efficiency and useful innovation. Under the new scheme, president of a NUC was supposed to be equipped with greater authority and responsibility.

Under these circumstances, presidents of the NUCs had to face with pressure to exert 'leadership' in bringing in reforms in their organizations. Given its symbolic status, it must have been particularly strong at the University of Tokyo. It was in this context that the first president after incorporation was inaugurated at the University of Tokyo in 2009.

3. Institutional Context

At the same time, the new president had to face with the conventions and procedures that formed the university's governance. They had been formed through the university's history over one hundred years. It provided at the same time, a prototype for university governance of Japanese universities, particularly the national ones.

The most salient characteristic of Japanese universities is that its organization is built upon individual Academic Divisions ("Gakubu" in Japanese) and other functional divisions such as research institutes and attached hospitals. There are ten Academic Divisions, each representing academic fields, at the University of Tokyo. Each of them function as the organization that faculty members belong to. At the same time, it is a basic unit for research. Moreover, Academic Division and the department underneath it function as educational program for undergraduate and graduate students. Academic division as an organization encompass all of three functions, faculty membership, research and educational programs.

Each Academic Division is administered by its Dean, but major decisions have to go through its Divisional Congregation ("Gakubu Kyoujukai" in Japanese) which consists of all academic members belonging to the division. In most cases, the Dean is elected in the Divisional Congregation.

Academic Division is at the same time the major building block of the entire institution. University Council ("Hyougikai"), consisting of representatives from Academic Divisions and other functional units, works as the major decision-making body for the university. Academic independence was in fact the independence of Academic Division.

After Incorporation, the University Council was transformed into Academic Council ("Kyouiku Kenkyu Kyougikai" in Japanese, which together with Management Council would advise to the President. The ultimate authority was given to the president and his board, of

which members were nominated by the president. Even though president is endowed with a fairly strong power in this structure, the consensus made in Academic Council was assumed essential for any important decision. Consequently, Academic Divisions still maintained a decisive power in university governance.

Obviously, there was contradiction between the expected change to be achieved by Incorporation and the practices in governance remaining at the university.

It was revealed when the Ministry of Education announced a "Global 30" program in 2008. For this program, institutions of higher education were invited to present their own proposal to enhance internationalization. Thirty institutions were to be selected from them for a five year grant to implement the plan. It was almost impossible for the University of Tokyo not to join in the competition. The first task for the president was to form a consensus on the proposal.

The plan necessitated a major increase in the number of undergraduate students from overseas. The initial plan was to organize a program for foreign students administrated at the university level, by asking each Academic Divisions to offer courses. This plan, however, met a considerable resistance at the Academic Council.

The reason for the faculties to be unwilling to agree on the plan was partly a practical one. In order to enable the plan, each faculty had to offer a certain number of courses, which will create an additional burden on faculty time. The faculty felt already over-burdened by the teaching obligations at graduate and undergraduate level in addition to the pressure for research. Holding courses in foreign languages meant an additional burden.

But there was a latent issue. As was discussed above, it was understood that each Academic Division has the ultimate authority over matters concerning education, including curriculum, recognition of academic units, and granting academic degree to the graduates. If the programs for foreign students were provided at the university level, then it had be administered at the university level. It would then be contradicting against the principle of prerogative of Academic Division. The president did not have enough ground to pursue his plan to set up the university level programs. It was the first major problem that the new president had to be faced with.

4. Design and Strategy of Change

It was in between the social expectation on one hand and the institutional reality on the other that the new president had to find a way to exert his leadership.

By 2011, the president started to sound a plan to alter the academic calendar, by shifting the beginning of an academic year from April 1 to September 1. This was later called the "Autumn Admission" scheme.

The change was purported to induce internationalization of the university. By realigning the time period of student admission with those in many of the other countries, it was supposed

to augment the size of students coming from overseas. It was also expected that the six months interval between graduation from high school and entrance to the university would provide opportunities for the students to have useful experiences outside academia.

The president was speaking about his intention occasionally, but the only formal occasion that he announced his intention was the Management Council. In July 2011, he released his plan to one of the major national newspaper, the Nikkei Shimbun, which reported in its front page that the University will change the academic calendar. Obviously, the president gave an exclusive interview with Nikkei Shimbun. He then called for an open press conference for major media, and they reported the plan as a major news.

A curious fact was that the announcement of the plan was made by the president before the decision was made through formal governance procedure. Even though the president did talk about the possible change in academic calendar, he did not present it as a formal agenda. It was only after it was made public he organized a committee for examining the pros and cons of the change. He also proposed the faculty to discuss the issue.

Why did he choose such a strategy? My explanation is that his strategy was to use the media, and the whole society, to influence the faculty into accepting the reform. The choice of Nikkei Shimbun in particular was intentional because it has strong influence on business leaders and politicians.

It was probably from his earlier experiences of failing in forming consensus for earlier plan for Global 30 program that he sought a way to circumvent the Academic Council. Academic calendar was chosen as the field of change, because it is certainly an issue at the university level.

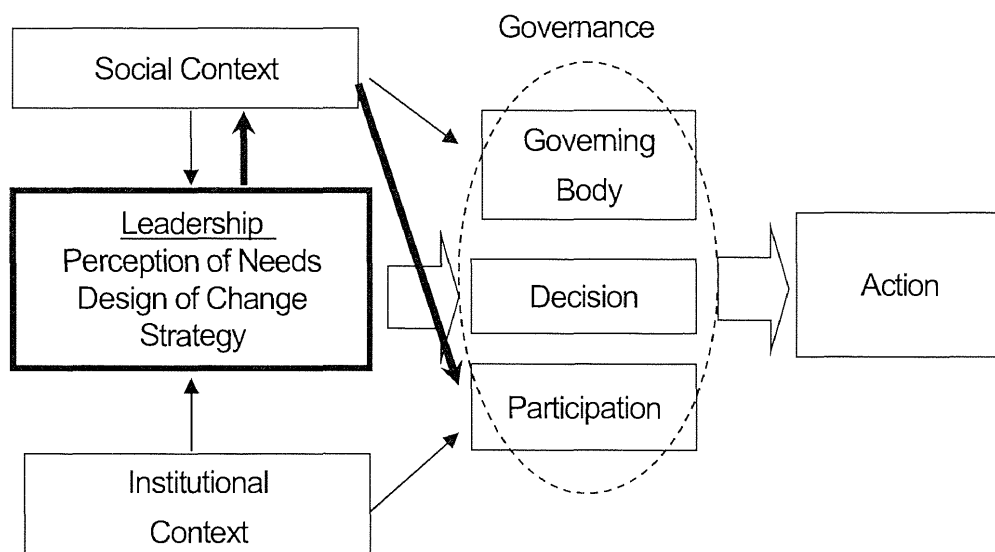


Figure 2. President's Strategy

He chose to mobilize the channel of media to influence economic organizations and political sphere. That would have created the pressure from outside of the university (Figure 2 below).

5. Consequences

Subsequently, a variety of discussion took place in various places of the society. As a whole, the initiative was received favorably by the media, and by the society as a whole. Newspapers and broadcasting services sent out various articles on the initiative with positive tone. Minister of Education expressed support for the plan.¹ Japan Business Federation, a major organization comprising representative corporations, stated that it would cooperate with the university to achieve the reform.

In the universities, faculty members remained ambiguous. There were some members that deemed the change unavoidable. However, as the discussion among faculty members developed, it became inevitably apparent that the proposed change would entail considerable problems in various aspects.

The foremost issue was the time for graduation. One would assume that if the admission took place graduation should be sometime in early summer to allow for four years in the university. Most of the employers, however, expect new recruits to join their organization as of April 1. It is essential under Japanese employment practices. Unless all the university in Japan change the date of graduation, only the graduates of the University of Tokyo would have to wait for another half year before employment.

Some argued for graduation in April by compressing the time of study from four to three and half years. For the faculty members, the option was impossible, given the necessary topics to cover the contents of curriculum. The pressure was particularly acute with the basic courses in the STEM track. It would be irresponsible to agree on that option.

By the end of 2012 the initiative towards the change was thwarting. In June 2013, the select committee for the changes in academic calendar issued its final report. It stated that the Autumn Admission had to be reexamined before implementation. Instead it proposed the shift from the ongoing Semester system to a Quarter system, which was supposed to allow studying overseas in summer.

Subsequently, the focus of reform has shifted to the details of the Quarter system. The report of the select committee stated that the decision about the Autumn Admission was to be left to the subsequent president. In the spring of 2015, a new president of the university was inaugurated, and he has shown no intention to revive the reform initiative. The issue is thus finally dead.

¹ Nikkei Shimbun, October 13, 2012.

Table. Chronicle of the Reform Attempt

2012	July 1	Newspaper report of Autumn Admission plan
		Various reports and articles in major media
		Select Committee was set up at the university to examine the plan
	Oct. 13	Minister of Education expressed support for the plan
2013	Jan.	Newspaper reports indicating the difficulty in implementing the plan
	June 19	Select Committee at the university issued a report that the implementation of the reform will be postponed

6. Epilogue

It is almost bewildering in retrospect that, after only one or two years since the initiative received wide attention, the politicians, Japan Business Association, or the major newspapers appeared as if they all forget about the intended reform. Probably it was because the difficulties in implementing the plan became recognized outside the university gradually. One can also suspect that the proposed reform did not directly address the immediate demands from the society.

Subsequently, move towards for reforms emerged in different forms. In 2013, the Central Education Council, a major policy organ under the Ministry of Education, started discussing about the power delegated to president relative to Academic Council in Japanese universities. It was argued that in order to enhance the changes in universities, it was essential to provide president greater power in decision making. The Central Education Council which issued a report recommending changes to that effect (Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai 2014). Subsequently the government proposed a revision of the School and University Education Law, which was authorized at the Lower and Upper Houses in the spring of 2015. It provided that president of university has the ultimate power in making decisions on significant matters of the institution, and the Faculty Congregation advises president over the matters on education at the request of the president.

The revision of law was significant in the sense that it emphasized the role of president in university governance. It was probably a reflection of a widely spread perception in the society of the need of prompting reforms in higher education institutions. It was also suggestive of the subtle shift of social sentiment leaning towards a greater degree of decisiveness in action.

However, it is still unclear how much actual changes it brings into the practices of

governance in higher education institutions. Even though the law defines the power of Faculty Congregation as that of advice to president, it can be interpreted that president's decision is confined by the decision of Faculty Congregation.

7. Conclusion

Then, what are the message to be derived from this incidence with respect to leadership and governance of university? One thing clear is that the nature and consequences of "leadership" are critically dependent on the social and institutional contexts. This is a thesis emphasized again and again in the literature on university organization (Birnbaum 1992; Bowen and Eugene 2015). It was proved yet another time by this incidence. In the particular case of Japanese higher education institutions, especially the national ones, I would point out the following three points.

First, leadership cannot be the objective by itself. It is natural that, because of the growing gap between the social demands for greater contribution from university on one hand and the slow changes in universities on the other, the expectation for more decisive leadership in university emerges. There is a significant risk in that argument because the particular design of the reform may be faulted. It is important to realize that the greater the gap between what is desired and the reality, the risk can be greater.

Second, the particular prospect and design of proposed change, which constitute the core of leadership, are critically conditioned by the circumstances in which leadership is being formed. In the incident described above, the design of Autumn Admission was at least too simplistic, if not faulted altogether, in hindsight. In the process of designing the reform, the leadership failed to take into consideration sufficiently the concrete problems to be anticipated. It should be pointed out that the National University Corporation scheme has a significant weakness in this respect. The University Board ("Yakuinkai" in Japanese) is designated as the major decision-making and executive body, but all of its members are appointed by the president. It is doubtful that the Board members to be willing to check the viability of an initiative before it is presented formally. Participation of faculty is important not necessarily because of the democratic principle, but because of the insights to be drawn from them.

Third, the obstacle for further reforms lies in the governance structure build upon Academic Divisions and Divisional Congregations. The move to National University Corporation was focused mainly on the relation between the government and the university. Legally, the corporation is a separate entity from the university itself, leaving a room of uncertainty. As stated above, the revision of Education Law gave greater authority to president as against Divisional Congregation. But, in practice, it does not necessarily deny the principle of governance based on Academic Division.

These problems, however, should not be solved by revision of law. It is completely possible

that each university make necessary changes on governance within the present legal framework. In fact in smaller institutions, the powers given to Academic Divisions are relatively small. The ultimate issue is how each national university would change the structure of governance towards more flexible one where the leadership and faculty participation can be combined according particular purposes.

To realize that change definite leadership is called for, and in that environment leadership will work effectively in enhancing the function of university in research and education.

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変容する日本の国立大学のリーダーシップ

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大学におけるリーダーシップの問題は各国において大きな問題となってきた。しかしリーダーシップの問題はその社会的、学内的コンテキストを無視しては語ることはできない。日本では2012年に東京大学において、入学時期を現在の4月から9月に移すという改革案が学長から発表された。しかしこの改革への動きはその後、実施には至らなかった。本稿はこの事例をもとに、なぜそうした形で改革案が提起されなければならなかったのか、またそれはなぜ現実化しなかったのかを分析する。それによって日本の国立大学の組織とガバナンスの構造的な問題の一端を明らかにすることを目指す。