

BOOK REVIEW

Measuring Quality of Undergraduate Education in Japan By Reiko Yamada (Ed.) (2014), 214pp. ISBN: 978-981-4585-80-4 (print), Singapore: Springer.

Scholars based in higher education institutions in the West will be familiar with the need to satisfy various bodies, internal as well as external, about the quality of the undergraduate teaching that goes on in their department. It was only a matter of time before this discourse on 'quality' and the institutions that go along with it should arrive at the shores of Japan, a nation that for many years was second only to the USA in the size of its tertiary education sector. Academics in universities in Japan, unlike their colleagues in the West, have usually not needed to answer to any higher authority about what goes on in their classroom, lecture-theatre or laboratory. Partly as a response to the authoritarianism that prevailed in Japan up to 1945, the post-war higher education system was founded upon strict principles of academic autonomy and freedom. This, combined with Japanese norms of respect for people, like university professors, who occupy positions of seniority, led to an atmosphere on Japan's campuses that made it very difficult for anybody to criticise a colleague's teaching. This was an unfortunate development, for as Reiko Yamada points out in this welcome new study of quality in education in Japan's universities, "a research-centered academic culture has long prevented substantive efforts to improve university pedagogy in Japan" (p. 22). This has been compounded by active "faculty resistance to educational assessment" (p. 95). Furthermore, students are unlikely to complain about the poor quality of undergraduate teaching because in most cases it is the name of the university and its network of contacts with employers that will determine career prospects post-graduation, not the content of the courses taught. In fact some critics of university education in Japan argue that, all too often, there is an unspoken agreement between professors and students that the pedagogic content of classes will not be too demanding on all parties concerned, allowing professors to spend more time on research and students to spend more time on social and club activities.

One of the most important contributions of Yamada's book is that it offers a practical way forward for administrators as well as professors that should address some of the serious problems affecting university teaching in Japan. The book has a slightly unusual structure in that although an edited volume, nine out of the twelve chapters are written by the editor with one additional chapter being co-authored by her. This gives the reader the feeling of a single-author volume for most of its length. However, it lacks some of the features of such a volume such as a final bibliography, or a glossary of the many acronyms that are used. The two chapters which are not written by Yamada complement well the other chapters in the book. Chapter one, written by John N. Hawkins gives an overview of Quality Assurance (QA) in other Asian nations and succeeds in giving a flavor of the "complexity, diversity of issues and motives of QA in the Asia region" (p.14). Chapter four, which is written by Patrick T. Terenzini and Robert D. Reason sketches a "conceptual map of the forces that the research literature suggests shape student success during college" (p. 70). It does not mention quality assessment in Japan, but it offers insights into how the debate is developing in education systems that are ahead of Japan in this area, particularly the USA. One advantage of the book's structure is that it allows the reader to dip in and read one chapter in isolation of the others.

The remaining ten chapters which are written by Yamada alone (except for chapter three which is co-authored with Aki Yamada) are devoted to a theoretical and practical discussion about how to achieve the Ministry of Education's goal of bringing Japan's university teaching up to internationally-recognised standards of quality. One of the first problems encountered by Yamada is the lack of quantitative research done thus far on the quality of undergraduate education in Japan – a lack

which speaks volumes about the attitude of most institutions of higher education to this very issue. Yamada writes that “(f)ew, if any, metrics exist at Japanese universities other than students’ scores on English examinations such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)” (p. 77). The author could have added that both of these tests are imperfect tools for measuring student advancement in English as a foreign language since they are designed with very different markets in mind. (TOEFL is a very difficult test designed to establish the suitability of the candidate to study at the university level in the medium of English, and TOEIC is a test designed to cheaply survey the English skills of large cohorts of company workers).

Yamada shows that although some data about students in Japanese universities has been gathered, it is of limited use.

Since student surveys among universities in Japan were traditionally conducted in accordance with particular areas of interest on the part of the individual researchers or research organizations, a wide variety existed in terms of survey goals – as well as methods of survey implementation and data analysis. As a result, university educational effects and learning outcomes were able to be measured only partially and indirectly (p. 128).

Given this dearth of useful systematic data, Yamada and her research team are to be congratulated for setting up their own set of student surveys which are introduced in chapter five. Two of these surveys (conducted in 2005 and 2007) are a source of data that is analysed in chapter six and compared with results from an American survey conducted in 2005. It is significant (but unfortunately not surprising) that one of the conclusions drawn from this analysis is that “the percentage of students indicating an outcome of learning was significantly greater in the USA than in Japan” (p. 106). Here Yamada injects a note of caution that must be heeded in comparing self-reported data across cultures. Most people would agree, for example, that Japanese young people are more self-effacing than their American counterparts, an impression that is reinforced by the US survey result that showed 77.6% of students considering themselves to be “above average” in their chosen subjects (p. 107)! Such subjective data is important, but it must be backed up by objective data - wherever that is practicable - for comparisons across cultures of quality assessment to be meaningful. Yamada suggests that such data should include “students’ credit acquisition, learning behaviors [for example number of hours spent studying], academic outcomes” and so on (p. 131). She also calls for greater transparency on the part of university departments that do collect such data.

Some of the most interesting and innovative parts of the book come in chapters nine, ten and eleven which deal with the period of transition between school and university. Yamada makes a strong case when she argues that the entry of the Japanese higher education system into a “post-massification” stage, i.e. one in which more than half of recent high school graduates enroll in higher education, means that more students than before will be poorly prepared for university study (p. 153). For an increasing proportion of Japanese students, there needs to be a smoother progression from the study methods used in high school to the study methods used in university. In chapter nine, Yamada discusses a survey she oversaw comparing American and Japanese policies relating to ‘first year seminars’, i.e. seminars designed to allow students to adjust smoothly to college life. Her research is based on questionnaires sent to several hundred American and Japanese deans and academic provosts in 2001-2. They asked about the content of first year seminars in relation to three factors: ‘academic skills’; ‘social skills’; and ‘internal identity’ (pp. 160-1). Respondents were asked to comment whether or not there had been improvements in these areas as a result of the introduction of the first year seminar system. The resulting data clearly show “that while American universities have seen improvement of students’ skills and abilities in many fields after introducing first-year seminars, improvements of students’ skills and abilities could not be observed in Japanese universities” (p. 166). Yamada argues persuasively that the reason for this difference lies in the shortage of useful data about the development of college students in Japan when compared to

the USA. As she rightly points out, “First-year seminars in the United States have not emerged in a vacuum” (p. 166), but are built upon a vast resource of data on ‘college impact’, i.e. the exact ways in which the student experience influences personal development and change. The lack of such data in Japan is a severe handicap for those seriously interested in improving undergraduate education.

In chapter twelve, which is the book’s concluding chapter, Yamada writes that “we are now at the point of beginning to utilize scientific data toward the enhancement of university education” (p. 213). For observers of the Japanese education system, the key word here is ‘beginning’, because it is a simple recognition of reality that Quality Assessment in the USA and other Western countries is well advanced compared to the situation in Japan. This is a reality that is all the more clearly exposed by the ground-breaking comparative research in this book. The Japanese education system has had great success in the past at catching up with more advanced Western systems. Quality Assessment of undergraduate education certainly has the potential for being another area where Japan can catch up and even surpass its rivals in the West (and in the developing world). Yamada, however, is not optimistic: in her conclusion she writes that “it appears unclear whether Japanese higher education – and society in general – will be able to deal with the speed and success that are being demanded of today’s globalized social order” (p. 209). If Japanese higher education institutions are to rise to the challenge presented to them, they will need much more of the kind of concrete data about undergraduate teaching and learning that is analysed in this book.

Robert W. Aspinall
Professor
Shiga University

