

Restructuring Japanese Universities: The Experience of Ritsumeikan University

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The topic which I would like to focus today is reform of universities in Japan. Since my specialization is business and corporate strategy studies, I would like to address this subject from the viewpoint of a critic of business strategy and management.

I. Four Major Challenges to Japanese Universities

Japanese universities are now facing with four major challenges arising from international and domestic environments. I would like to call these challenges as “LIST” challenges. They are easy to list but hard to overcome. The “LIST” challenges derive from Less students, Internationalization, Support, and Technological change.

A. Less Students

This is the “L” in the LIST. We must consider demographic changes. The number of 18-year-old students in Japan arrived in its peak in 1992, and since then has rapidly declined. This means that a traditional pool of applicants to universities is shrinking. There will be fewer and fewer individuals entering in universities in Japan. These incoming students are students that Japanese universities have been seeking in a traditional sense. In order to compensate for this decrease, it will be imperative for universities to focus more on continuing education. By highlighting a need for continuing education, universities will be able to reserve a new and broader pool of applicants.

B. Internationalization

This is the “I” in the LIST. We are conducting our re-evaluations of the past progress in foreign language instructions, exchange programs with university and colleges in foreign countries, and the Colleges of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University. Inside Japan, Ritsumeikan University has been credited by its rapid and extensive growth

or advancement in the so-called 'internationalization' of higher education. Nevertheless, observed from an international and comparative perspectives, Japanese universities as a whole still lack what they could appeal to potential students who wish to study abroad and to be exposed to international experience. For example, large numbers of students from the Asia-Pacific region study abroad each year. However, these students choose to study primarily at schools in the United States and Europe, rather than coming to Japan. Thus, an urgent task of Japanese universities is to develop a system of education that is attractive and valuable to international students.

C. Support

This is the "S" in the LIST. In order to achieve any reform, we must recognize and identify the necessity of financial resources. Without proper financial resources, it is impossible to carry out any meaningful restructuring. Unfortunately, availability of finance for higher education in Japan is now very low and is in a formidable condition. The Japanese government continues to grapple with a stagnant economy and budget deficit, while at the same time attempting to balance the national budget. Thus, educational funding has become a target for budget cuts. Furthermore, it is important to note that seventy-three per cent of higher educational institutions in Japan are privately funded, and seventy per cent of their finance comes from tuition from students. This is indeed a heavy burden on the part of parents and students, and on the society in general. Increases of tuition will give profound repercussions on society. As we view this rather bleak financial situation in private higher education, we find ourselves confronting with major constraints whenever we try to actively advocate reforms or to pursue improvements in educational qualities. The question that must be answered is: "How can we resolve the financial dilemma, now overshadowing Japanese universities?"

D. Technological Change

This is the "T" in the LIST. We are confronting with rapid and revolutionary changes in science, ever-increasing reliance on and utilization of information technologies, and also with changes in many kinds of knowledge and information. Universities in Japan must adapt to these changes by re-working the system and re-organizing the content and framework of its education. However, it is uncertain whether Japanese universities will be able to demonstrate a necessary flexibility and responsiveness in order to cope with these changes. This seems even difficult especially in light of current conditions and capabilities of faculty councils.

II . Restructuring at Ritsumeikan University

In order to overcome the above mentioned issues and problems, Japanese universities have tried to devise numerous strategies. I am unable to summarize all of these know-how and other measures and methods, but I would like to talk in concrete terms about a reform now occurring at Ritsumeikan University, i.e. several kinds of reform which I have been witnessing and engaging in.

Ritsumeikan University has been diligently devising its university strategies for more than ten years, now. In fact, these reforms have been receiving much praise and have been observed from outside institutions, as effective, productive and lasting.

A. Educational Reform

Please let me summarize the elements of educational reforms in six categories at Ritsumeikan University since mid-1980s to mid 1990s:

1) New Colleges and Graduate Schools. The most important aspect of the restructuring of the University in this period was the establishment of new colleges and graduate schools. In 1988, the College of International Relations, and in 1994 the College of Policy Science were established as the seventh and eighth undergraduate college. Graduate programs in these fields soon followed. In creating these new programs, our ultimate goal was to inculcate and strengthen the education system with three concepts of internationalization, information orientation and interdisciplinary studies.

2) The second major development was a founding of new campus, the Biwako-Kusatsu Campus. We call it as BKC campus. The College of Science and Engineering was originally located on our Kyoto Kinugasa Campus. However, as the number of new courses and research on scientific technology steadily increased, the Kyoto space became tight and restrictive. So, we determined to open a brand new campus. To our benefit, the BKC campus is only a twenty-minute train ride from the Kyoto JR Station.

BKC is approximately five times larger than the Kyoto Campus, and the College of Science and Engineering now has about twice the number of students it used to have when it was located in Kyoto. Additionally, the number of departments in the College has grown from six to ten. These new departments, encompassing the most advanced technology and engineering fields, include the Departments of Computer Science, Photonics, Robotics, and Bio Science and Technology.

3) The third reform was a revision of the framework of curricula of each college. The

main thrust of this reform was to introduce a new course system known as the Institute, which provides a system of education in comprehensive manner under curricula with interdisciplinary subjects and courses. Basically, the older, somewhat stale arrangements were replaced by versatile and revitalized curricula, which could better accommodate the subject matters that we are now faced with and that the today's society needs to solve.

4) The fourth change was the establishment of various and extended international exchange programs. Now, we have various exchange programs that send Ritsumeikan students to study abroad. One of the main programs is a joint educational program between the University of British Columbia (UBC), in Canada, and Ritsumeikan University. Ritsumeikan University has been fortunate enough to be able to share a dormitory on UBC campus with Canadian students. It is called as Ritsumeikan House, where one hundred Ritsumeikan students live and study together with one hundred UBC students, enjoying college life in a wonderful environment in Vancouver, Canada.

Another example is a Dual Degree Program with the American University in Washington, D.C., in the United States. Under this unique and innovative program, students spend basically two years at Ritsumeikan and another two years at the American Universities equally, working for two undergraduate or master's degrees. At the completion of their studies, i.e., four years for undergraduate and two years for master programs, students receive two degrees, i.e. B.A. or M.A.

In addition to the above mentioned international joint programs, Ritsumeikan University receive nearly 350 international students mostly from Asian countries, and send nearly 400 Ritsumeikan students to countries such as Australia, China, France, Germany, Korea, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States.

5) Fifth, with regard to admission to Ritsumeikan University, we have reorganized the application process and entrance system. Until recently, admission to most Japanese universities has been solely based on scores of entrance examinations. Moreover, the period in which students may sit for their examinations were quite limited. Also, each university has given examinations separately and independently. Under these circumstances, in order to admit a wide variety of students who have good and advanced skills and abilities, we have come to realize that the entire system needed to be modified. Thus, Ritsumeikan University determined to adopt a unique admissions system, by which wide range of criteria and different methods of selection were taken into account in reviewing candidates for admission. Now, it has been our policy to admit nearly twenty per cent of students under these special entrance examinations. Further, in order to assure that the students are invited from various parts of Japan, and at the same time that applicants

need not to travel all the way to Kyoto City to take their examinations, we now offer entrance examinations throughout Japan. No other university in Japan currently offers this sort of opportunities.

6) The sixth major reform was an admission of people in the workforce. Regarding continuing education and admissions of students returning to university, Japan lags far behind the United States. Realizing that this may be another area for progress, Ritsumeikan University has introduced a system previously unknown in Japan. Under the new program, 320 working students enter the Continuing Education Program, every year.

B. Future Changes

Next, I would like to touch upon three areas where future changes are planned as we approach the 21st century. These plans for reorganization have been formulated, utilizing the knowledge gained from over ten years of careful observations of our previous reforms. The coming changes will be on a much larger scale than any of those that have been instituted so far at Ritsumeikan University.

1) First and foremost, we plan to establish a new university, the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. The new university is under construction outside Kyoto, and it is a truly joint effort and ventures between Ritsumeikan University and two local governments, i.e. the Prefectural Government of Oita and the City Hall of Beppu. The date of the opening of the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University is April 2000.

As the initiative has no precedent in Japan, the opening of the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, APU, will prove to be a watershed. A fundamental difference between APU and others lies in its singularly internationalist outlook. Recognizing that the internationalization of higher education in Japan lags far behind than that of many other nations, we hope that this new university will dramatically change the situation in Japan. Under the planned framework for the school, approximately fifty per cent of students will be international students primarily from the Asia Pacific region. Also, we hope to offer courses in English as a common language of instruction and communication for all students and staff. The Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University is a huge undertaking that we believe will provide necessary human resources and academic training of people for the 21st century.

2) Second, we planned and in April 1998 moved our two Colleges of Economics and Business Administration to the Biwako-Kusatsu Campus, BKC, to which I have already

referred as our new and expanded campus. In the process of relocation, we have also renewed the curriculum of these colleges.

The coupling of the Colleges of Economics and Business Administration with the College of Science and Engineering, already located at BKC, marks the creation of a new interdisciplinary coursework. We have plans to initiate interdisciplinary sub-majors such as Finance Management, Service Management and Environmental Design. Also of critical importance to BKC will be the establishment of a new graduate business school. We plan to make BKC reflect a modernized educational powerhouse.

3) Third, now the Colleges of Economics and Business Administration have moved to BKC, major renovations will take place at our Kyoto Campus which continue to be the home of the five Colleges of Law, International Relations, Letters, Policy Science and Social Sciences. We will rejuvenate the Kyoto Campus, which is uniquely located in Japan's ancient capital, and bring attention to its special international and cultural features.

C. Ties with Other Institutions

As we have been carrying out these reforms, we have also vigorously comprehensive ties with other institutions.

Traditionally, Japanese universities avoided active relations with various organizations, especially business corporation, in an effort to protect scholastic freedom and maintain a sense of independence. However, in the mid-1980s Ritsumeikan concluded that it is vital to actively encourage relationships with governmental, industrial and non-governmental organizations. Without accessing the valuable resources offered by these organizations, it would have been impossible for Ritsumeikan to create our new colleges.

Our interaction with other institutions first allows us to effectively incorporate modern topics into our courses and research, and second, provides us with a broader base for financial assistance. We believe that it is our urgent duty to reduce our dependence on tuition.

Regarding relations between universities and other organizations, American universities are far ahead of us. Nevertheless, we recognized that the significance and value of the arrangements American universities have with outside organizations. Moreover, we understand that universities need not give up their scholastic freedom and independence in order to have close relationships with outside organizations. This, too, we have learned by studying the educational systems of other countries. Even though we have far to go, Ritsumeikan is in the vanguard in Japan.

1) Firstly, Ritsumeikan formed cooperative relations with regional governments in Japan. We received great cooperation from Shiga Prefecture and Kusatsu City when obtaining land for our new BKC campus near the Lake Biwa. We also currently benefit from relations with the prefectural and municipal governments of Oita Prefecture and Beppu City for Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. Beppu City donated the land for the new university and the cost of construction is being shouldered by Oita Prefecture. It would be impossible for universities merely using their own resources to build new campuses and colleges such as these.

2) Secondly, Ritsumeikan has taken the lead in forming relationships with industry and private business. On each campus we have offices that handle the many incoming requests from industry regarding the establishment of cooperative relations. The system we have set up at Ritsumeikan has received wide acclaim, and I am proud to point out that a study that the Arthur D. Little corporation gave Ritsumeikan the highest ranking in Japan for nurturing beneficial ties with industry. Although we are currently leading the way in Japan, there is yet much to be accomplished.

III. Some Lessons from Our Experience

The Ritsumeikan experience has taught us much. Reforms at Japanese universities must follow a basic "TASC" approach. This means that reforms must include: 1) Teamwork and consensus building; 2) Assessment which is continuous, systematic and self-critical; 3) Strong leadership; and 4) Continual, sustainable reform. Thus, Ritsumeikan tackles the "LIST" of problems, Less students, Internationalization, Support and Technology, as a "TASC" which can and shall be overcome.

A. Teamwork

The "T" of the TASC stands for Teamwork and consensus. One must recognize the overriding importance of rapidly obtaining everyone's cooperation in carrying out reform. In order to bring any reorganization to fruition, teamwork is critical. No matter how exceptional of a reform one designs, the cooperation of those integral to its implementation is vital. Otherwise, the chance for failure is high.

As in the business world, the role of leadership among top management is critical when securing and maintaining this synergy. For us, the cooperation among the faculty council was difficult to obtain. To surmount this obstacle as quickly as possible, a strong and persuasive leadership was the most important factor.

Nor is Teamwork limited to one university. Quite the opposite, it is impossible

to carry out reform in institutions of higher education in isolation. Diversity in educational reforms is required, and each university has its own limitations. Thus, it is important for universities to collaborate in carrying out reforms.

One recent example, a consortium of approximately 50 universities and junior colleges in Kyoto and Shiga began a new system of transferring credits between universities. This is having a great effect on educational reforms in institutions of higher learning in Kyoto and the Shiga district. We must continue to vigorously pursue these kinds of flexible ideas in order to create true reform.

B. Assessment

The “A” of the TASC stands for Assessment. This means Assessment which is continuous, systematic and self-critical. In order to ensure that the restructuring is sustainable and implemented on a continual basis, it is essential that the reform process be systematic. For example, as a commitment to our students, Ritsumeikan systematically reviews tuition rates and academic credit every four years. This has been a valuable motivator for reform. In turn, this system also allows us to measure the efficiency of our use of financial resources, and initiate needed changes.

C. Strong Leadership

The “S” of the TASC approach stands for Strong leadership. The roles of the leaders in initiating reforms is fundamentally important. For example, one of our most important reforms was Internationalization. Although this reform affected all Colleges and Departments of our university, it was extremely difficult to get a consensus among the Colleges and Department to carry out the reforms. Initially, we encountered great resistance. To persuade all departments to participate, it was first necessary to establish a College whose main objective was internationalization. Thus, Ritsumeikan founded the College of International Relations. This new school then acted as the primary catalyst in convincing other schools within Ritsumeikan to adopt reforms related to internationalization.

Now, as we enter a new Age of Internationalization, often called the Asia Pacific Era, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University will play an enhanced role on a wider level in assuring that our education system and training methods suit the needs of a modern international society.

D. Continuation

Finally, it is extremely important that reforms be continual. Thus, “C” stands for the Continual nature of reforms in the TASC approach to the LIST of challenges facing

Japanese universities today. Once a reform begins, organizations tend to become satisfied with initial results, and revert to complacency. We have seen this happen many times at Ritsumeikan. The world at large, though, does not become complacent. Thus, it is not practicable to rest after accomplishing just one change. Constant vigilance is required. Of the entire element in the TASC approach that I have discussed: Teamwork, Assessment, Strong Leadership and Continual reform, this last one, Continual, is the most important.