

# The Japanese University—Reformed or Deformed? I The Myth and Reality of an All-Purpose Management Cycle<sup>1</sup>

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- I Introduction
- II An Overview of Japan’s University Sector
- III Japanese Universities in Ruins
- IV Reform Policies : Panacea or Fatal Remedies?
- V PDCA : Reform Panacea or Another Ploy for “Gaming”?
- VI Use and Misuse of Business-Related Terms

## I Introduction

In 1968 campus strife raged in many countries all over the world, including Japan. Japanese student activists at that time frequently used the phrase *daigaku-kaitai* or “university deconstruction” as one of their slogans. This phrase originally meant the deconstruction of the old, antiquated, and undemocratic university system so as to transform it into a more democratic one. Yet, ironically enough, Japanese universities have been “deconstructed” in a quite different sense from what the student activists originally imagined. In fact, generally speaking, instead of becoming a more democratic and autonomous system, Japanese universities have increasingly succumbed to the pressures of the Government, especially those coming from the Ministry of Education. As a consequence, Japanese universities have lost their vitality both in research as well as education.

The above are basic assumptions of a Japanese book that I edited and published last year, together with four collaborators. The title of the book, accordingly, can be translated as *50 Years of University Deconstruction : Recommendations for the Regeneration of Japanese Universities in the Next 20 Years* (Sato et al. 2018). One of my arguments in a couple of chapters in the book was that government-initiated reform policies are largely responsible for the university deconstruction, or more precisely, “university destruction” in Japan during the last three decades. In other words, I argued that Japanese universities have faced serious crisis

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this essay are based on the arguments in Sato et al. (2018) and Sato (2019).

not *in spite of* government's push for reform, but *because of* the reform policies. I repeated essentially the same arguments in a single-authored volume that was published in 2019, whose title could be translated into English as *Adrift in the Maze of University Reform* (Sato 2019).

One of the central questions in the two books was—to what extent have Japan's HE (higher education) reform policies over the last three decades been effective? Looking at the abovementioned arguments, the answer should be quite obvious. In a nutshell, the answer is: to very little extent. Many policies have led to unintended negative consequences, leading to a pervasive 'reform fatigue' among Japanese universities' staff.

The answer to the first question naturally leads to the second question: "Why have the reform policies been so ineffective and sometimes hugely detrimental to the education and research at Japanese universities?" I have presented a number of answers to this question in my books. There are ample reasons why Japan's HE policies "*deformed*" rather than reformed education and research at universities.

This essay will focus on two of those reasons: misplaced model-learning and means-end reversal. These two features, in combination, have greatly contributed to make Japan's HE reform policies "fatal remedies" (Sieber 1981).

In this essay, misplaced-model learning mainly refers to the process in which Japanese policymakers borrowed profusely either from the ideas and techniques that are popular in the business sector or from the HE-related concepts and practices in other countries, especially the US. As this essay will show shortly, one can frequently find instances in which university staff as well as policymakers (mostly government bureaucrats) have used fashionable terms (or buzzwords) closely related to the models, while they know almost nothing about the details of the original models.

Such blind mimics could easily end up in means-end reversal. Means-end reversal, in this case, refers to the situation in which the adoption of reputedly effective "business models" or the "American models" quite often has become an end in themselves. In fact, there have been instances where the adoption of such imported models became a goal which eclipsed the goal of attaining substantive improvement in education and research.

## II An Overview of Japan's University Sector

Before going into details of the predicament of Japanese universities arising from the government-initiated reform policies, a short description of the overview of Japan's university sector is in order.

In Japan, there are currently 1,112 HEIs (HE Institutions), including 786 four-year universities and 326 two-year colleges (as of 2018). About 2.9 million students attend the four-year universities (this figure includes around 250,000 graduate students), while approximately 113,000 students attend two-year colleges. About 188,000 academic staff are hired to take care of the students.

Aside from the four-year and two-year dichotomy, Japan's university sector is usually divided into three major subsectors according to the differences in installation modes, i.e., private, public, and national. About 80 percent or 607 four-year universities are private. The remaining 20 percent of the universities are almost equally divided into 86 national universities and 93 public universities. Most of the public institutions are either prefectural or municipal universities.

While there are more public universities than national universities, the student population of national universities far outnumbers that of the public universities. There are about 606,000 students in national universities, while less than 160,000 students are enrolled in public universities.

But, the overwhelming majority of university students—over two million— in Japan are those enrolled in private universities. On the other hand, private universities have relatively more students per academic staff member than public universities. In fact, while about three-fourths of students belong to the private universities, those who teach them comprise less than 60 percent of the total number of university teachers. Consequently, the simple average of student-faculty ratio of national universities (9.5 : 1) is about half of that of private universities (19.5 : 1).

This disparity between the national and private universities can be reaffirmed by the following summary table.

Table 1 Summary Statistics of the Three Subsectors (Four-year Universities)

| Installation Mode | HEIs<br>% | Students<br>% | Academic Staff<br>% |
|-------------------|-----------|---------------|---------------------|
| National          | 10.9      | 20.8          | 34.2                |
| Public            | 11.8      | 5.4           | 7.5                 |
| Private           | 77.3      | 73.8          | 58.3                |
| Total percent     | 100.0     | 100.0         | 100.0               |
| (Number)          | (786)     | (2,918,708)   | (187,876)           |

Source : MEXT (2018)

These differences between the national and private universities in Japan could be explained largely in terms of the differences in the functions that each type of university is

expected to serve in Japanese society. National universities are supposed to be research-oriented, while private universities are more teaching-centered. In fact, the transition of the Japan's HE from an elite-centric to a mass-accessible system (Trow 2010) in the 1970s was mostly achieved by responding to growing demands for university education (or for credentials of diploma), either through the expansion of enrollment limit of existing private universities or establishment of new private universities (Osaki 1999).

This functional differentiation can be seen also in the difference in the number of graduate students at each type of universities. In fact, about 60 percent or more than 150,000 graduate students are enrolled in national universities, while there are less than 85,000 students (approximately 33 percent of the total) studying at private universities' graduate programs.

There is also a huge gap between government subsidies to the three types of universities. As of 2018, 86 national universities were provided approximately 1.1 trillion yen, while only 317 billion yen was given to 607 private universities through the MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). (As for the public universities, they were provided 163 billion yen through the Ministry of Internal Affairs.) Chiefly because of poor public support, the finance of private universities in Japan heavily depends on the tuition fees obtained from students.

### III Japanese Universities in Ruins

The functional differentiation and the differences in the financial base of private and national universities explain the differences in the major problems that each type of universities confront. In the case of private universities, dwindling enrollment and consequent financial crisis are the most serious problems. On the other hand, poor performances in research and in world university rankings are perceived to be the most serious problems of the national universities. Japanese policymakers have regarded all these problems as critical indicators of the impending crisis of Japanese universities.

This essay mainly addresses the problems related to the national and private universities, because public discourse mostly centers around the problems that can be found in these two subsectors.

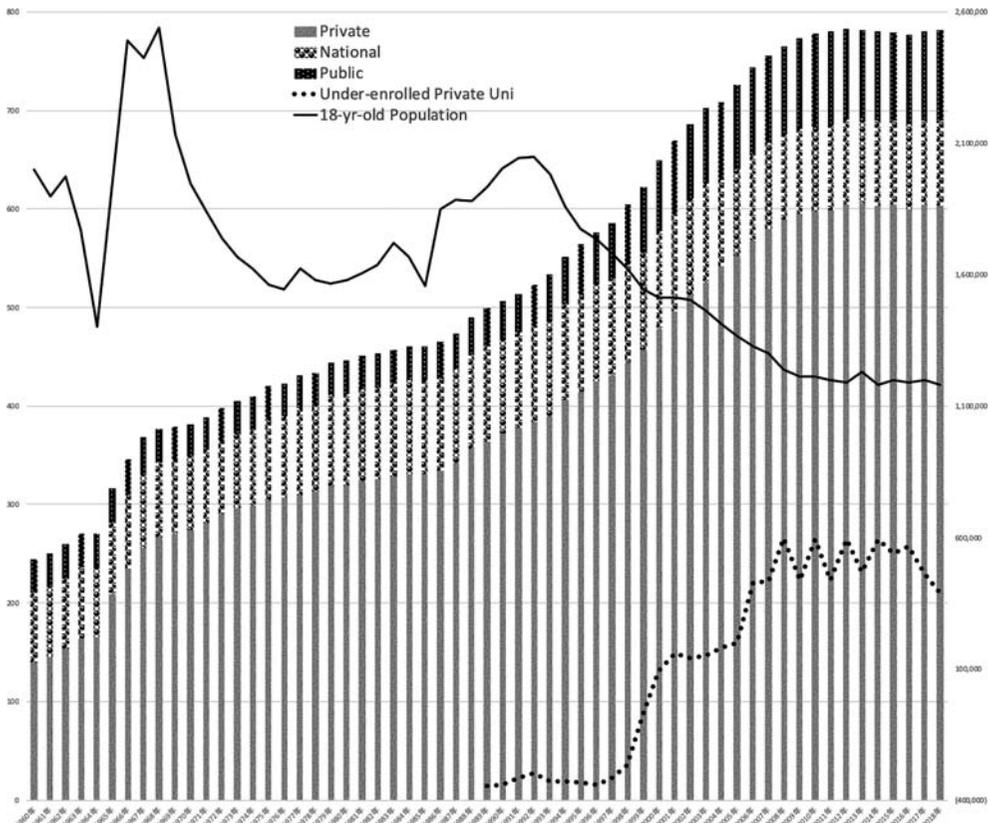
#### *Private Universities*

It has been pointed out that approximately 40 percent of private universities have suffered from under-enrollment during the last decade. This problem is especially serious in

the case of small and mid-sized universities in local areas. The root cause of this financial crisis is quite obvious. Fig. 1 shows the changes in the size of 18-year-old individuals' population as well as the number of universities in each subsector during the last six decades. As can be seen from this figure, while 18-year-old population has decreased consistently since the early 1990s, the number of private universities has increased up until 2010. In fact, 18-year-old population reached its peak—about 2,540,000—in 1968 when the postwar baby boomers came of age. While the population has reached the second peak when the baby boomers' children came of age during the few years from the late 1980s and the early 1990s, it has declined almost consistently since then, and nearly halved in 2018 to 1,180,000.

While the effect of the declining 18-year-old population had been, to a great extent, offset by the rising university entrance rate since the mid-1990s, the increase in the rate has stagnated during the last ten years. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the number of under-enrolled private universities increased drastically after 1998. By 2008 more than 40 percent of the total private universities were under-enrolled.

Fig. 1 18-Year-Old Population and the Numbers of Universities : 1960-2018



Source : Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (2017), MEXT (1960-2018)

As a consequence of diminishing enrollment, a number of private universities, especially those with inefficient management, closed their operations or were merged with other private universities. Some private universities were able to survive by being remodeled into public universities. Local governments often initiated the change. They came to the rescue of the failing private universities because they feared that their closure would worsen the declining local economy. In view of the prospect of further decline of the birth rate, it is highly likely that more and more private universities will be closed in the near future.

### *National Universities*

The situation has been quite different in the case of national universities. The decline of the youth population is also one of the most serious problems for a number of national universities. Especially in the case of national universities in local areas, decrease in the number of applicants and the dwindling governmental support have given a serious blow to their *raison d'être*. As a consequence, a number of local national universities, largely with the urging of MEXT, are now planning to merge their operations.

As for major national universities, their most serious problems are poor performance in research and in the world university rankings. For example, the ranks of the University of Tokyo and University of Kyoto in the *Times Higher Education* (THE) world rankings have almost consistently declined during the last decade. While University of Tokyo ranked 11th in 2011, it fell to 42nd in 2019. Similarly, Kyoto University's rank plummeted to 91st in 2017, from 52nd in 2012: however, it did recover a little since 2017 and rose to 65th in 2020. Although the dubious nature of the methodology in ranking universities around the world has been widely acknowledged (Hazelkorn 2015; Ishikawa et al. 2016), Japanese policymakers often refer to the declining ranks as a critical sign showing the collapse of the HE system in Japan.

Policymakers' sense of impending crisis is further aggravated when the Japanese universities' ranks are compared to those of major universities in other Asian countries. A number of major Asian universities have succeeded in achieving higher rankings in recent years. The 2019 THE rankings placed National University of Singapore (23rd), Tsinghua University (22nd), Peking University (31st), and University of Hong Kong (36th) significantly above Japanese universities.

While university rankings may not be a particularly good indicator to gauge the relative strength or weakness of university systems in various countries, Japanese universities do not fare well regarding the productivity of academic publications either. For example,

according to an estimate, although the Japan's rank in the share of top 10% highly quoted academic articles was fourth during the period between 1994-1996, it dropped to 11th in the 2014-2016 period. In clear contrast to that, during the last two decades China's rank soared quite rapidly, from 17th to second, just below the US (Research Unit for Science and Technology Policy 2015 : 120-123). The news industry as well as Japanese policymakers have frequently referred to the declining academic productivity of Japanese universities as a crucial symptom of the crisis in the HE sector of this country.

One of the major reasons for Japanese universities are losing their international position may be their failure to globalize themselves. This is suggested by the fact that over the years, fewer Japanese students have been going abroad to earn higher education degrees. For example, according to the data provided by the US's Institute of International Education and compiled by the Fulbright Japan, the number of Japanese students in US's HEIs has declined considerably during the last two decades. While the number peaked in 1997, exceeding 47,000, it has declined almost consistently since then and was less than 19,000 in 2017 (Fulbright Japan 2018 ; See also U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan n.d.)

#### IV Reform Policies : Panacea or Fatal Remedies?

It is against this background that various reform plans and funding programs have been proposed by Japanese policymakers. Many of the plans and programs were presented as a kind of panacea, but some of them ended up as "fatal remedies".

##### *Example of Major Reform Plans*

Reform policies consisted of revising laws and ordinances and devising new grant schemes. One of the most significant ordinance amendments was the revision of the University Act in 1991. The new University Act was originally conceived as a part of a larger governmental policy aiming extensive administrative and fiscal reforms. The reform policies were chiefly based on the idea of market-oriented deregulation. By the deregulation measures included in the new university act, the distinction between liberal education and specialized education was abolished. This led to the closing of the faculty of arts in many Japanese universities. The amendment of the University Act also included the introduction of mandatory self-evaluation.

Incorporation of national universities in 2004 was another major turning point in the postwar history of university reforms in Japan. The incorporation, which foreign observers

characterized as a kind of “big bang” (Goodman 2005 : 1) reform and “the biggest higher-education reforms in more than 100 years,” was made possible by the new National University Corporation Act, which had been legislated in 2003. This law, like the case of the revision of University Act, was based on the idea of market-oriented deregulation, and one of the major models for national university corporation was UK’s “executive agency”. It was argued that national universities would function more effectively and efficiently, if they had independent status and more managerial autonomy (See Eades, Goodman and Hada (eds) 2005 for a fuller explanation of the reform plan).

As for the new funding programs, one can mention “The 21st Century Center of Excellence Programs” launched in 2002 and the “Super Global Universities Grants Program (SGU)” launched in 2014 as two typical grant schemes. Both of them are based on the idea of *sentaku to shuchu* or selectivity and concentration : i.e., they consist of selective and intensive funding for specific universities.

#### *The Case of the SGU Program*

This section delves into the case of Super Global Universities Grants Program as a funding program showing three distinctive characteristics of a number of university reform policies in Japan—a considerable gap between over-expectation and undersupply, misplaced selective funding policy, and rampant use of “gaming” or gaming-the-system tactics.

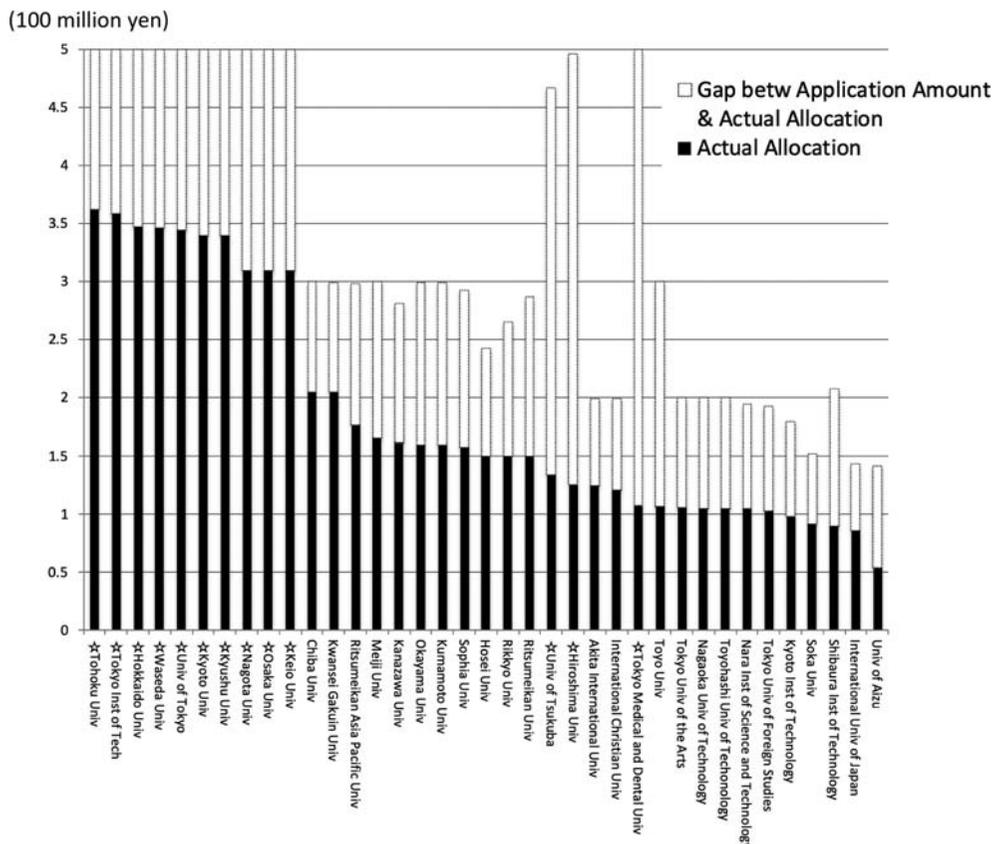
“Super Global Universities Grants Program” is a literal translation of the Japanese name of the program, that is, *Suupaa Gurobaru Daigaku Sosei Shien Jigyo*. While the official English name for the grants program is “Top Global University Project” (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science <https://www.jsps.go.jp/j-sgu/index.html>), I decided to use the literal translation of the name and its acronym SGU throughout this essay because it reveals the irony in the Japanese name. In fact, the combination of “super,” “global,” and “university” may sound quite bizarre to English-speakers. (It may remind them of a slightly farcical anecdote in which a couple of British entrepreneurs, being amused by a Japanese beer brand name Super Dry, came up with the apparel brand name “Superdry.”) The irony, needless to say, chiefly comes from the fact that one of the major goals of the grants program is to globalize Japanese universities. The “globalization” of the universities includes an attempt to make Japanese students have a better command of foreign languages, especially English.

When the idea of the grants program was first presented at a meeting of the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council, it was announced that the major goal of the grants program is to boost up the ranks of Japanese universities in the international university

rankings. So, it was declared that “over ten universities are supposed to rank in the top 100 HEIs in the world university rankings” (Education Rebuilding Implementation Council 2013 : 3). Policymakers argued that they would be able to attain such an ambitious goal by “intensive funding” to recipient universities. It was initially assumed that each of the “top type universities” (HEIs who have the potential of achieving the ranks within the top 100) will receive about 500 million yen. On the other hand, “global traction type universities,” or those universities who are expected to show leadership in globalizing Japanese society will be given either 300 or 200 million yen according to their organizational sizes. Yet actually, as far as university people were concerned, very few believed in such fanfare, and thought that the announcement was just another hyperbole.

In fact, when the funding program actually started, those at recipient universities were dismayed to find that there were huge gaps between the application amounts and actual allocations (According to a news report, one of them even said that it was almost a “confidence game” (*Asahi Shimbun* April 26 2016)). Fig. 2 shows the actual allocations of

Fig. 2 Allocations for “Super Global Universities”



Source : MEXT (n.d.), Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (n.d.)

grants money (for the fiscal year 2015) to the recipient universities. The 37 HEIs were chosen either as “top type” (13 HEIs) or “global traction type” (24 HEIs) universities.

In this figure, black bars show the actual allocations while white bars show the disparity between the allocations and application amounts. From this figure, one can see that not only were the allocated funds too little to support the substantial globalization of Japanese universities, but also there were huge gaps between the application amounts and actual allocations. For example, while the Tokyo Medical and Dental University was chosen as one of the “top type” super global universities, they were provided about 108 million yen, or less than one fifth of the application amount in 2015. Even the Tohoku University, which obtained the largest allocation, received less than 400 million Japanese yen. To make matters worse for the recipient universities, the total value of the grants program was slashed quite rapidly. In 2019, the sum total of the fund was 3.4 billion yen, i.e., almost one-third of amount in 2014 (9.9 billion yen).

Such a “mingy” financial support is probably one of the major reasons why the ranks of the 37 universities have not shown any significant improvements during the last six years.

### *Three Features of Japan’s HE Reform Policies*

The SGU’s case clearly shows three distinctive characteristics of university reform policies in Japan during the last three decades. First, we can frequently find a huge gap between the over-expectation (or overly ambitious goals) and meager public support for universities. The second feature of recent reform policies is the misplaced selective funding programs which are, as a whole, fragmentary and piecemeal. And the third feature is the rampant “gaming” or sneaky manipulation that is found both in the reform policies themselves and in the reactions of Japanese universities to the policies.

Besides the above-mentioned case of the SGU, one of the most well-known examples of the first feature, i.e., the gap between over-expectation and meager public support for universities, is the decreasing public subsidies provided to national universities. Since the national universities were incorporated in 2004, operating expense grants (block grants) to the 86 HEIs have been almost consistently decreased (the pace of the decrease slowed down during the last five years). As a consequence, while the sum total of the grants was 1.24 trillion yen in 2004, it shrank to 1.1 trillion yen in 2015. In other words, the grants were decreased by more than ten percent during the ten-year period : the decreased amount almost equals the total sum of the operating expense grants given to 20 mid-sized local national universities (Mainichi Shimbun Maboroshino Kagakugijutsu-rikkoku Shuzaihan 2019 : 107-

110).

One of the major reasons for the decreasing support to HEIs is certainly the ever-worsening national fiscal crisis over the last three decades. Due to the rapidly aging population of Japan, the rapid expansion of the social security expenditures including medical and nursing services makes it quite difficult to allocate government budget to other budget fields. Under such circumstance, to ensure effective and judicious use of public money, selective funding is a reasonable, and almost inevitable, strategy. Yet, so-called selectivity and concentration funding policies for HE research in Japan are often misplaced at best. In worst cases, they look like a waste of public money.

In the case of the SGU program, the number of recipient universities had increased beyond the original plan, for reasons that have not been disclosed. The original plan was to select ten top type universities and twenty global traction type universities. As mentioned above, the numbers increased to 13 in the case of top type and 24 for global traction type universities. As a consequence, the execution of the grants program was a far cry from the original idea of “intensive funding” or “selectivity and concentration.”

A recent report by the Center of Research and Development Strategy (2017) pointed out that such inconsistent public support was not limited to the SGU program but could be found in other grants programs as well, although those programs had been originally intended to establish “Centers of Excellence” (COE) in research. Through the detailed examination of the durations and the number of recipients of various COE-type funding programs, the authors of the report concluded that such grants programs tend to lack mutual coordination, and are often fragmentary, piecemeal, and short-lived (Center of Research and Development Strategy 2017 : i).

The following is a (verbatim) quote from the executive summary of the report written in English :

[T]hese programs aiming at the new center foundation have built in an unsystematic manner, some issues raise by the various shapes. Mainly, there are the difficulty of the long-term strategy planning, the differential of the educational research environment according to the tendency to reward large-scale strong institutions, and restriction of a wide educational research field. In addition, sustainability issues are lying after the financing period (Center of Research and Development Strategy 2017 : ii).

Such a combination of insufficient as well as inconsistent support and over-expectation

often forces Japanese universities to resort to various types of “gaming” or gaming-the-system operation. Most of the gaming is intended for “window-dressing” of some sort. A typical example of such window-dressing can be found in a creative interpretation of “foreign teachers” in the case of the Super Global Universities Program. Because applicant universities are supposed to globalize their universities, they have to increase the number of foreign teachers in their academic staff bodies. However, the application document for the program equivocated about the requirement. It included the phrase “and others” (*et cetera*). As a consequence, applicant universities are allowed to include Japanese academics who spent one year or more in other countries as “foreign teachers and others” (Kariya 2017). In other words, many of the foreign teachers in the “super global universities” were actually Japanese teachers in foreign teacher’s clothing. . . .

## V PDCA : Reform Panacea or Another Ploy for “Gaming”?

Gaming-the-system practices are found not only in HEIs’ reactions to reform policies. They are also found in various reform policies themselves. This section and the Part II of this essay address the case of PDCA (acronym for a management cycle) and *shirabasu* or Japanese-style syllabus, as two typical examples of such gaming. The PDCA’s case illustrates the way in which managerial ideas imported from the business world end up in misplaced model learning. On the other hand, the case of *shirabasu* shows how a model borrowed from the HE sector of another country (United States) has led to a means-end decoupling, and eventually to means-end reversal.

### *PDCA as an Effective Management Cycle*

PDCA is the acronym of the phrase “Plan-Do-Check-Act.” PDCA or “PDCA cycle” has been around as a buzzword in Japan’s HE sector since the early 2000s. It was originally coined by Japanese engineers in the early 1960s as an acronym epitomizing the nuts and bolts of efficient and effective shop floor management, especially for quality control of factory production.

It is nowadays believed that the essential idea of the PDCA has a wide applicability not only to business firms but also to organizations in the public sector, including hospitals, administrative agencies, and various types of schools. Therefore, it comes no surprise that the term PDCA has been incorporated into a great number of documents related to university reforms. For example, PDCA or the phrase Plan-Do-Check-Action (an explanation for this

“Japanglish” variation will be provided shortly) appeared 87 times in the application documents submitted by 24 (out of 37) recipient universities of the SGU program. PDCA also appeared 114 times in the business reports submitted by 53 (out of 86) national universities to the National Universities Evaluation Committee in 2017. In the general overview of the institutional evaluation, the Committee also referred to the “reinforcement of the PDCA cycle” as one of the remarkable achievements of the national universities’ reform attempts (National Universities Evaluation Committee 2017 : 3).

The origin of PDCA can be traced to the idea of a management cycle for quality control in factory production. In fact, the acronym PDCA has been relatively well known among Total Quality Management (TQM) specialists around the world since the mid-1980s. It has been argued that if one follows the following four steps systematically and in a proper order, one can attain an effective quality control, and even remarkable improvement or *kaizen* (Ishikawa 1985 ; Imai 1986 ; Moen, Ronald and Clifford 2010) :

1. Plan : Define a problem and hypothesize possible causes and solutions.
2. Do : Implement a solution.
3. Check : Evaluate the results.
4. Action [Act] : Return to the plan step if the results are unsatisfactory, or standardize the solution if the results are satisfactory (Moen and Norman 2010 : 25-26).

It has been also argued that Edwards Deming, an American *guru* of statistical quality control proposed an idea of management cycle which was later rephrased as PDCA by Japanese engineers : PDCA cycle is sometimes called “Deming Cycle” or “Deming Wheel” (Moen and Norman 2010 ; Cf. Deming 1982, 1991). The idea of PDCA was eventually incorporated into the International Standards, first into the ISO 14000 series in 1996, and then into the ISO 9000 series in 2000.

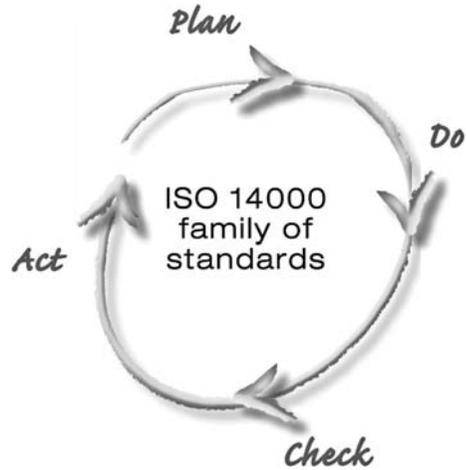
Fig. 3 shows a typical graphical representation of the PDCA cycle in Japan. Similar illustrations are found in many public documents as well as in technical manuals for business management. On the other hand, Fig. 4 shows a similar management cycle found in the official manuals for ISO 9001 and 14001.

Fig. 3 A Typical Graphical Representation of PDCA Cycle in Japanese Literature



Source : <https://ameblo.jp/mi-ina54/entry-12439937684.html>

Fig. 4 PDCA in an ISO 14001 Manual



Source : [https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/archive/pdf/en/theiso14000family\\_2009.pdf](https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/archive/pdf/en/theiso14000family_2009.pdf)

### *PDCA Renaissance in Japan*

It should be noted here again that PDCA is, as shown in Fig. 3, often used as an acronym of Plan-Do-Check-Action in Japan. This “Japanglish” acronym is closely related to an origin myth of the PDCA. The myth was created by Kaoru Ishikawa and other Japanese engineers in the early 1980s. Ishikawa was a University of Tokyo professor, and later became the president of the Musashi Institute of Technology. He was a *guru* of TQM in Japan. He was also one of the major advocates of PDCA. On various occasions, Ishikawa attributed the PDCA’s origin to Deming. For example, he once said, “It was Dr. Deming who introduced the phrase Plan-Do-Check-Action into Japan” (Ishikawa 1982 : 13). On the other hand, he later admitted that he and other Japanese engineers made up a story that Deming had coined the term. He also said that they came up with the term “PDCA circle” or “PDCA cycle” by modifying Deming’s original idea (Ishikawa 1986 : 22). However, it is quite unlikely that Deming, an American, used the word “Action” instead of “Act” to refer to an effective management cycle. Deming himself, on several occasions, clearly disowned PDCA as his own idea (Deming 1982 : 131 ; Peterson 1997 : 114).

Irrespective of the “true” origin of the term, PDCA has been quite popular among quality control specialists in Japan since the late 1960s. Yet it was limited to a relatively small circle of specialists for several decades. The situation changed rather dramatically in the early 2000s ; PDCA became something of a buzzword at that time. A relatively clear symptom of this “PDCA Renaissance” first appeared in the business sector as an increase in the number of manual books on PDCA. While only a few books addressing PDCA had been published until

2004, the number of newly-published books on PDCA jumped to 14 in 2004 and has remained a double-digit number every year since then. The number of PDCA-related articles also increased in the early 2000s. National Diet Library Search (<https://iss.ndl.go.jp/>) shows that the total number of PDCA-related publications reached 181 in 2018.

A detailed examination of publication patterns reveals that this renewed interest in PDCA diffused to the public sector around 2003. At first there were more PDCA-related publications addressing business firm management than those dealing with the management of public sector organizations such as hospitals, municipal governments, and schools (including universities). Yet, beginning in 2006, the number of publications focusing on public sector organizations sometimes surpassed that of the publications addressing business management. Internet searches also show the tremendous popularity of PDCA cycle in Japan: a Google search for “PDCA cycle” generates more than 4.2 million hits. The major topics in the Japanese websites range from organizational management to management of individuals’ daily activities. On some websites, one can also find advice to use PDCA as *the* master key to the success in various type of examinations, including certification exams and university entrance examinations. PDCA, therefore, has been perceived to be a sort of panacea or magic wand that is hugely effective in solving almost all sorts of problems.

#### *PDCA Cycles for Higher Education Reform*

In view of the immense popularity of PDCA as a versatile or all-purpose management cycle, it is no wonder that the phrase and figures similar to Fig. 3 frequently appear in the official documents related to public policies ranging from fiscal policies to health and hygiene policies. In fact, PDCA is almost ubiquitous in Japan’s policy documents, including documents addressing HE reforms.

For example, the MEXT issued a policy document titled “Implementation Plan for University Reform” in 2012. In the document, the PDCA appears in a page addressing the selective funding of block grants to national universities. It was proclaimed that the whole process of the selective funding policy should consist of the following four phases: P—planning at the MEXT, D—implementation of selective allocation of internal resources at each university, C—evaluation of the results both at the government and university levels, A—reformulation of the policies for the next step of reform, again using the PDCA cycle (MEXT 2012 : 21).

Another noteworthy example of reform-related documents highlighting PDCA is a report issued by the Central Education Council (CEC) in 2016. The title of the report was “A

Guideline for the Formulation and Implementation of Diplomat Policy, Curriculum Policy, and Admission Policy.” The Council report commented on the crucial matters that university staff should keep in mind in implementing the three policies as follows :

In order to improve the quality of education, the university should establish an internal quality assurance system by establishing a PDCA cycle that starts with the policy statement for each policy formulation unit. For example, in the case of a degree policy, those who are responsible for the management of teaching and learning should arrange to rotate the management cycle consisting of the following four phases : setting up goals for the selection of enrollees, education through the curriculum, and conferring of degrees (the goals are supposed to be clearly defined in formulating the three policies) (P), implementing the selection of enrollees and systematic education (D), self-evaluating the degree of achievements of the goals specified by the three policies (C), and implementing improvement and reforms necessary for the degree program (A) (CEC 2016 : 7).

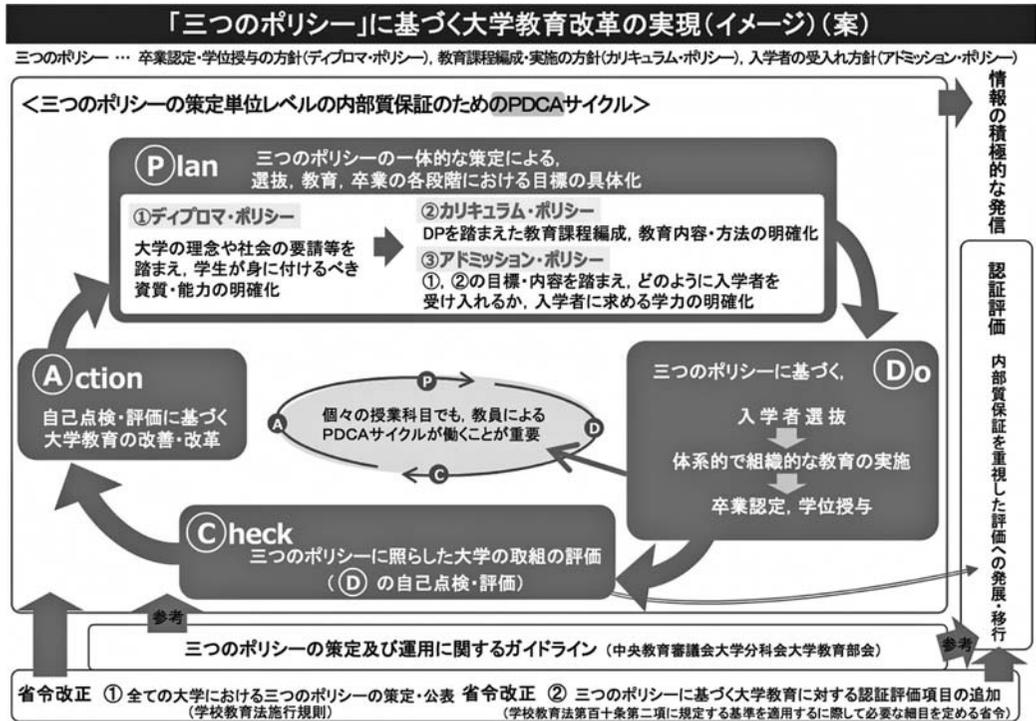
The report also argued that PDCA should be applied not only at the departmental level but also at specific course levels in order to improve the quality of teaching by each faculty member. The report went on to demand the establishment of a comprehensive, university-wide management system of teaching and learning that would oversee and control the quality assurance system at each department.

Fig. 5 is a graphical representation of the PDCA cycle that was included in the document.

One can see from this figure that all of the three policies (i.e., diplomat policy, curriculum policy, admission policy) are included in the planning phase (Plan). After the step including selection of enrollees, systematic education, and conferment of diplomas is implemented (Do), each university is supposed to carry out self-check and self-evaluation of the whole practices (Check). The final results of the evaluation should be the basis of the reform and improvement of the system of teaching and learning at the university (Action). Near at the center of the Fig. 5, one can see a PDCA cycle of a much smaller size. This small PDCA cycle corresponds to a management cycle that is supposed to be “rotated” by each academic staff member for the improvement of his or her teaching at each class.

While the above two examples are taken from policy documents issued by the MEXT and CEC, nowadays references to the PDCA cycle can be found also in the documents issued by universities themselves. As has been previously pointed out, the majority of the recipient

Fig. 5 Three Policies and PDCA Cycles



Source : Central Education Council, Subcommittee for University Education (2016 : 11)

universities of the SGU program referred to PDCA in their application forms in 2013, and many national universities included PDCA in their business reports in 2017.

One of the major reasons why PDCA has become so popular in Japan’s university sector is that the idea of PDCA was included in a report issued by the CEC in 2008. In the report, which was titled “Toward Qualitative Transformation of University Education in Order to Build up New Future,” PDCA cycle was referred to five times as a crucial part of quality assurance of university education. The report argued that while most Japanese universities had already institutionalized self-check and self-evaluation system, its procedure tended to lack in substance and does not form a proper PDCA cycle because its significance had not been fully recognized within each university. On the basis of such a recognition, the report argued as follows :

Third party evaluation should take full consideration of whether the system of internal quality assurance . . . is firmly established through the smooth functioning of PDCA cycle, including self-check and self-evaluation (CEC 2008 : 49)

Accordingly, shortly after the report was issued, accreditation associations also incorporated PDCA as one of the essential requirements for the applying universities to be accredited. Japanese universities, therefore, now have no other choice but to include references to PDCA in some form or other in their documents related to educational reforms.

### *The Reality of PDCA-based University (Mis)Management*

Only a cursory examination of such documents, however, is enough to see that the references to PDCA is in most cases a sort of window dressing, lacking any intention of actually implementing or “rotating” the management cycle. For example, the application document submitted by SK University (pseudonym) to the SGU program included a figure showing four PDCA cycles. Two of them were related to the management of university as a whole, and the other two were supposed to serve as a mechanism for constant improvement of education and learning. PDCA cycle for education was supposed to be rotated clockwise while the other cycle for learning was supposed to be rotated counter-clockwise, and the two cycles were supposed to be closely linked through the D phases. It was quite difficult, almost impossible, to make sense of the twin circles from the figure. The supplementary statement in the application form was of no help in deciphering what was actually meant by the twin circles, because the statement was too short to figure out the seemingly complex relationship included in the “Value co-creation education for the quality assurance of education and learning” ([https://www.jsps.go.jp/j-sgu/data/shinsa/h26/sgu\\_chousho\\_b14.pdf](https://www.jsps.go.jp/j-sgu/data/shinsa/h26/sgu_chousho_b14.pdf)).

The same applies to a figure which was presented at various occasions at DY University (pseudonym) for the preparation for an incoming accreditation process. This figure, very much reminiscent of a graphical representation of the mandala (Buddhist imagery of the universe) included seven PDCA cycles in total. While five of them were supposed to be applied to the management of specific operations (e.g., admission, teaching, support for students), the sixth one was designated as “others” or “*et cetera*.” Since this meant a residual category, this figure seemed to presuppose almost an infinite number of PDCA cycles.

In fact, one can add any number of PDCA cycles if the management cycle is merely a plan without any intention of implementing it. In such a case, it would be more apt to present PDCA as PdCa, with “d” and “a” in small letters. Here P stands for “planning for planning’s sake”. As a consequence, in the implementation phase, only a small portion of the plan, say five percent may be actually carried out. The remaining 95 percent will fizzle out, so that a lowercase “d” should be far more suitable for representing the supposedly “D” phase. But you have to write a plausible self-evaluation report that appears to be based on serious and sincere

self-checking process or “C.” In the report, you are supposed to say, “Management cycle has been successfully completed.” In the end, it frequently happens that you put off the real solution of the problem. The problem may never be solved, since you have no intention of devoting yourself to actually carry out “Actions” for reforms but are preoccupied with petty “actions” for window-dressing. In many cases, then, PdCa is anything but an effective management cycle. It is actually a vicious circle, or what may be called, a *mismanagement* cycle.

## VI The Use and Misuse of Business-Related Terms

The arguments in the previous section suggest that the PDCA framework served not so much as a management cycle leading to effective reforms but as a ploy for gaming the system both for policymakers and universities. For policymakers, the use of business-related terms such as PDCA will work as a device to show that they are tackling university reforms in real earnest. As for universities, the PDCA serves as a convenient prop for window-dressing. This section addresses the case of PDCA as an illustrative example showing the role that managerial way of thinking played in the discourse on reform policies.

### *Management Speak and the NPM*

PDCA is not the only term imported from the business world to Japan’s HE sector. One can also find a great number of management-related terms in the policy documents treating university reform. Some of them take the form of acronyms such as PDCA, KPI (Key Performance Indicators), and SWOT analysis. Other terms include benchmarking, logic tree, and branding. It should be noted here that the proliferation of business-related terms is not limited to policy discourse on HE reform, but can be observed quite widely in the discourse on administrative reforms in Japan.

In the background of the frequent use of PDCA and other management-related terms, a certain strand of thinking has existed—so-called New Public Management, or NPM. In fact, the NPM-way of thinking has been around for more than twenty years in Japan, i.e., since the early 1990s (Osumi 1999), and the management-related terms mentioned above had been already familiar in a variety of policy areas before they were imported to the HE sector.

### *Misuse of Management-Related Ideas and Terms*

It should be needless to say that the use of the business-related idea or terms is not a

problem in itself. There may be many ways in which bureaucratic style of management in public sector could be made more efficient and effective by means of the ideas and techniques borrowed from the business sector. In fact, this is one of the essential ideas included in the NPM-way of thinking. Yet, it has been frequently pointed out that NPM is quite a controversial way of thinking, since it is often nothing but a hodgepodge of ineffective or obsolete management ideas and techniques.

For example, on the basis of a review of NPM practices in south east Europe, Wolfgang Drechsler argues as follows :

NPM therefore acts and looks like the application of business and management techniques to the public sector, but not only in an inappropriate and simplistic, but also in an obsolete way (Drechsler 2009 : 10).

Also, some business ideologies and principles are just preached, but not practiced. For example, Christopher Pollitt, a well-known critic of the NPM, points out that many of the ideas borrowed from the business world (e.g., 360 degree accountability) “may be more often written about than actually undertaken” in the business world itself (Pollitt 2003 : 94).

In a similar vein, Robert Birnbaum pointed out, in his *Management Fads in Higher Education* (2000), that one can frequently find management fads and fashions in higher education in the US. Birnbaum is a higher education researcher and also served as vice chancellor and chancellor at a number of American universities. Partly on the basis of his own experiences, Birnbaum traced the trajectories of a number of managerial ideas, such as Zero-Base-Budgeting, Management by Objectives, Total Quality Management, and argues that one can identify a typical lifecycle of such ideas. The lifecycle begins with initial enthusiasm and sector-wide diffusion, but often ends in disillusionment and eventual abandonment.

These critics’ arguments suggest that the managerial ideas or “management speak” in public sector often end up in misuse or abuse, because many of them are nothing but blind mimics of overhyped corporate jargons. The overextension of the PDCA idea in Japan appears to be a typical example of such misuse of a management jargon or buzzword.

#### *The Case of PDCA : The Myth of an All-Purpose Management Cycle*

As has been previously pointed out, the use of PDCA is often nothing but a ploy for window-dressing for universities as well as for policymakers. It should be noted here that the misuse of the PDCA idea is not limited to public sector organizations but can be found in the

business world as well. For example, through an extensive review of the Japanese literature on PDCA and other related terms such as PDS (Plan, Do, See), Yui (2011 a, 2011 b, 2012) points out that Deming's original idea of statistical quality control has been largely modified almost beyond recognition and PDCA has become a sort of empty buzzword in Japan's business world.

Similarly, Kato (2017), a well-known Japanese specialist in managerial accounting, warns about the misuse of PDCA as a management tool. In an essay titled "Managers who give a command 'Rotate the PDCA cycle!' are irresponsible," he argues that the PDCA is not necessarily a versatile management cycle. According to Kato, while PDCA-style progress management may be appropriate for certain jobs such as routinized factory productions, it is not suitable for most other jobs.

He mentions budget control management as a typical example for which PDCA-style progress management is not appropriate, and argues as follows :

Budget planning starts well before the eventual outcomes of the previous budget plan are confirmed and assessed : a new plan is not made after its previous plan has been compared with the actual business results and corrective measures have been taken. In other words, as for budget planning, it is impossible to rotate a PDCA cycle, even if one wants to (Kato 2017).

#### *PDCA and "KPI" in Japan Revitalization Strategy (2013)*

One of the most important roots of an almost obsessive (mis)use of the PDCA cycle both in the business world as well as in the public sector can be traced back to a government manifesto published in 2013, titled *Japan Revitalization Strategy : JAPAN is BACK* (Cabinet Office 2013). This manifesto was issued shortly after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office in December 2012, and it was revised in the three consecutive years from 2014 to 2016. In all of these manifestos, PDCA cycle figures prominently as a key to achieve policy objectives or "targets" proposed in the revitalization strategy. It is noteworthy that in these documents, PDCA is supposed to be tightly coupled with KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), another term borrowed from the business world.

Since the combination of the two terms shows a clear example of the misuse of business-related terms in policy documents, the following paragraphs from the English version of the manifesto should be worth quoting in full :

This Growth Strategy presents “targets” (KPIs) that should be achieved for each set of major policies. “Targets” including indicators identified by international organizations, are established to enable objective, routine, and comprehensive evaluation of policy outcomes, including through international comparisons.

Furthermore, the individual measures necessary to realize the “targets” show a clear direction, methodology, and implementation period. As many of these individual measures will require detailed designs, amendment of law, budget requests, tax system reforms, and other procedures for implementation, the existing bottom-up PDCA cycle will need to be applied to monitor the progress of individual measures (Cabinet Secretariat 2013 : 11).

One can find that not only PDCA but also the term KPI is used erroneously in the above quote : “KPI” in these documents is mixed up with “Key Performance Target” or “Key Performance Goal.” It should be needless to point out that “indicator (measure)” and “target” are two separate things. In fact, while a certain measure may be treated as a KPI to gauge the extent to which some policy target is achieved, the measure should not be confused with something that is supposed to be assessed by the measure.

This confusion or the misuse or KPI’s Japanglish use was fairly extensive in the three editions of *Japan Revitalization Strategy*—there are more than a hundred instances of the term KPIs in each of the documents. For example, the second *Strategy* (English version) mentions it 107 times like in the following instances :

〈KPI〉 Extend the nation’s healthy life expectancy by one year or more by 2020

〈KPI〉 Aim to expand the level of capital expenditures to approximately 80 trillion yen a year in the next three years (by FY 2018)

〈KPI〉 Expand the business size of PPP/PFI to 21 trillion yen for ten years (from FY 2013 to FY 2022). Of which amount, the target amount of concession-based PFI projects is 7 trillion yen (Cabinet Secretariat 2014 : 123).

The term was also applied to higher education policies as shown below :

〈KPI〉 At least 10 Japanese universities will be in the top 100 world universities in the next 10 years.

〈KPI〉 Aim to allocate resources to reform initiatives at each university and maintain the

percentage of the amounts affected at about 30-40% of the operation cost subsidies as at the end of FY2015 (Cabinet Secretariat 2016 : 127).

Similar examples of misuses of the term KPI can be found profusely in the government manifesto after it was renamed as “Growth Strategy” instead of “Revitalization Strategy” since 2017.

#### *When NPM Turns NPMM*

As has been previously argued, “management speak” or the frequent use of business jargons in policy documents is closely related to the NPM-way of thinking. It should be noted here that NPM sometimes includes two seemingly contradictory ideas. On one hand, NPM emphasizes decentralization and autonomy of the managers at the frontline of public services, thereby making it more efficient by eliminating excessive red tape and reducing monitoring costs. Yet, on the other hand, NPM is sometimes based on an economistic, principal-agent way of thinking based on low-trust or fundamental distrust about the people who are working at the frontline of public services. In such a case, one has to monitor closely what actually happens at the frontline of public services.

Tom Christensen and Per Læg Reid (2007) explain this combination of contradictory ideas included in NPM as follows :

NPM was, however, something of a hybrid, advocating both decentralization (let the managers manage) and centralization (make managers manage). NPM is thus a double-edged sword which prescribe both autonomy and more central control at the same time (Christensen and Læg Reid 2007 : 8).

If the centralization and the idea of more central control are combined, New Public Management will lead to NPMM, that is, New Public *Micromanagement*. The case of *Japan Revitalization Strategy* clearly shows this possibility. In fact, when KPIs are given in a top-down manner not as indicators but as key performance “targets” and if the PDCA cycle is applied to “monitor the progress of individual measures,” all administration reform policies will tend to become NPMM. This, indeed, has actually happened in university reforms in Japan.

In order to examine the details of the NPMM-like elements in HE reforms, we have to examine another case of misplaced model-learning. This time, the model was imported not

from the business world but from the HE system in other country, i.e., US. Part II of this essay will address this issue focusing on the case of *shirabasu* or Japanese-style syllabus. We will see that the adoption of this reputedly effective “American model” has become an end in itself—introducing a syllabus and standardizing it through close monitoring of the content of syllabi have become goals which far outweigh the goal of attaining substantive improvement in university education.

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