The Japanese university—reformed or deformed? II: means-end decoupling and audit failure in policy implementation

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Ikuya Sato

I Introduction

The first part of this essay (Sato 2020) addressed the case of PDCA cycle as a typical example of Japanese university reform policies that have ended up in a number of unanticipated negative consequences, including rampant “gaming” (gaming-the-system tactics) and petty micromanagement. One of the major reasons of the negative consequences was a misplaced model learning. While the idea of PDCA may be somewhat relevant to certain types of tasks at business firms (e.g., shop floor management), it is not necessarily suitable for the practices at public sector organizations. Indeed, any idea of “policy cycle” is often an ideal type (Cairney 2016: 18). The real-world policy process is fraught with compromises and repeated trial and error, thereby cannot be portrayed as a neat sequence of a number of cyclical stages. In view of the reality of policy making and implementation, which often include messy elements, PDCA cycle applied to public management is frequently nothing but a “pie in the air.”

Similar is the case with shirabasu, or Japanese-style syllabus, which will be addressed in this essay. Unlike the case of PDCA, the original model of the shirabasu was taken not from the business world, but from the US higher education sector. Yet, the two cases share

1 Parts of this essay are based on the arguments in Sato et al. (2018) and Sato (2019).
one important thing in common: both cases include means-end reversal. Means-end reversal, in this case, refers to the situation in which the adoption of reputedly effective “business models” or “American models” quite often has become an end in itself. Moreover, the adoption of such imported and “imposed” models at times became a goal that far outweighed the goal of attaining substantive improvement in education and research.

After describing distinctive characteristics of shirabasu and its institutionalization process in Japan, this essay will delve into the general background underlying the process in which many of the HE reform policies have ended up in means-end reversals. Largely based on the ideas of neo-institutionalism in organizational studies, this essay argues that decoupling and colonization (Power 1997) are two typical reactions of Japanese universities to the institutional pressures exerted by the government under the name of “reform.” Moreover, we will analyze strange combinations between these two types of reactions. This essay also highlights that dearth of public support to higher education and “crowded policy landscape” are two major reasons that Japanese universities have had to resort to such defensive and/or evasive measures.

II Institutionalization of Shirabasu (Japanese-style Syllabus)

Extreme Uniformity

While shirabasu is a loanword from English, staff and students at universities of other nations may be surprised to know that such a booklet as shown in Fig. 1 has often been called shirabasu (syllabus) in Japan.

This 4 cm thick B5 size booklet weighs more than 1.6 kilogram and compiles course syllabi of approximately 800 classes taught at a department of Japanese university in 2017.

Fig. 1 Japanese-style Syllabus
The total number of the pages of the booklet surpasses 1000. This booklet was distributed to all students (about 500) enrolled in the department, and each of the other 5 departments of the university also compiled and published its own syllabus booklet. Nowadays, syllabi are being used in electronic form at most Japanese universities. However, before the early 2000s, similar booklets were published at many Japanese universities. A number of universities even competed with each other for the “thickness” of the syllabi booklet (Kariya 1994).

Besides the bulky size of the booklet, one can mention the high degree of uniformity of the format and content of the syllabi included in the booklet as another distinctive characteristic of the Japanese-style syllabus. Furthermore, on examining the syllabi of universities all over Japan, one will find that almost the same items are arranged in a standardized manner. Even the style of the statements in the *shirabasu* is almost uniform. Many of the statements take the form of so-called “can-do statements” with students as the subject of each sentence: e.g., “students will be able to understand…,” “students will know and explain about…”

*Shirabasu* has become increasingly standardized largely because a certain fixed template is imposed by the university administration on academic staff through a guidebook for syllabus writing. In a typical guidebook, not only a fixed syllabus template but also a couple of exemplary syllabi are provided. It also frequently happens that the use of certain verbs is highly recommended, and inappropriate terms and statements are specified.

The guideline for syllabus writing used at the medical school of KGW University (pseudonym) provides an extreme example regarding the efforts of universities for standardization. The guideline lists 156 verbs to be used in the statements about the objectives and goals of each course. For example, the following 15 verbs are supposed to be used for the statement about the overarching purpose of a course: know, recognize, understand, feel, judge, acknowledge, evaluate, locate, discuss, use, implement, apply, indicate, create, and acquire. As for the goals of a course, the guideline subdivides them into 3 domains and lists a certain number of verbs for each of the domains: knowledge domain-71 verbs, attitudes and habits domain-22 verbs, skill domain-48 verbs.

The standardization of the *shirabasu* is further facilitated by the monitoring system instituted at each university. At each department, a number of committee members are appointed to carefully oversee the drafts of syllabi with great care in order that every *shirabasu* conforms to a specific format. If some syllabus drafts deviate from the format, the committee members persuade their authors to revise the drafts. In most cases, the academic staff members who draft such “anomalous” syllabi comply with the committee members’
requests. Many universities have also introduced an administrative IT system, including a standardized input template, for syllabus as an integral module.

**Institutionalization of Syllabus at Japanese Universities**

Course syllabus is a relatively recent invention in Japan. There were sporadic cases in which specific academic staff, especially those with an experience in higher education in other countries, used syllabi for their own classes. Yet, most other courses were taught without syllabi. This situation changed rather dramatically during a few years in the early 1990s, as can be seen in Fig. 2.

This graph shows the changes in the ratio of those universities that had made it obligatory for their academic staff to construct a syllabus for each course. While there are certain variations in the institutionalization process according to universities’ installation modes, syllabus had been institutionalized in almost all Japanese universities by the early 2000s.

The most important reason for this rapid institutionalization of syllabus in Japan is quite obvious: syllabus was mentioned as one of the most effective tools for university reform in a report issued by the University Council in 1991. As suggested in the first part of this essay, when the University Act was revised in 1991, the revision was largely based on the recommendations included in the University Council’s report (Sato 2020: 7-8). In the report, a number of practices in the US HE (higher education) sector were featured as the crucial keys

![Fig. 2 Changes in the Ratio of Universities that have Institutionalized Syllabus](source: MEXT (1993-2006), Sato (2019: 41)
to the reform of Japanese universities. In other words, American universities and the US university system were treated as the exemplary models to emulate. In fact, the practices mentioned in the report include matters such as faculty development, curriculum guidance, and accreditation.

The revision of the Standards for Establishment of Universities in 2007 included a newly introduced article that can be interpreted as the one requiring every university to institutionalize syllabus. The article (Article 25) established that each university should specify annual plans of courseworks. On the other hand, the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) explicitly stated about the article that each university was required to ensure that its academic staff constructed a syllabus for every course to assure students’ learning quality (MEXT 2007: 57). Syllabus, then, was treated as a sort of panacea for educational reform in Japan.

**MEXT’s Directives**

Ever since “syllabus” or *shirabasu* was introduced into the policy discourse on HE reforms in Japan, the MEXT, on various occasions, has urged universities to improve the quality of syllabi. Among the measures taken by the MEXT, three stand out: a survey about the progress of university reform, application requirements for public grants, and accreditation requirements. All these measures have contributed to the standardization of syllabi at Japanese universities to a considerable extent.

In 2001, the MEXT initiated a yearly survey titled, “On the present state of educational reforms at universities” to which all universities are supposed to respond. The survey includes a series of items questioning the format and content of syllabus, and the items have become increasingly elaborated since then. For example, the 2016 survey, after quoting the Article 25 of the Standards for Establishment of Universities, first asked whether or not the university had standardized the syllabus format. The survey, then, went on to interrogate if the university incorporated the following eight items in its standard syllabus format: relationship between the university-wide degree policy and each course, course number, detailed description of each course, homework assignments, specific directions for preparation, required hours for preparation for class, methods of instructor feedback to the assignments. Furthermore, the survey also included a question asking if the content of syllabi was supposed to be audited by other faculty members and if any measures were adopted to correct syllabi written in a non-standardized style. This survey, then, urged universities to standardize the basic format and specific contents of syllabi according to a prescribed template.
The MEXT has urged universities to construct syllabi along a certain line by means of various types of grant programs. A typical example of such grant programs is the Grants for General Reform of Private Universities (GGRPU), which started in 2013. The application form for the grant usually includes items concerning syllabus. For example, the 2017 application form included a couple of items related to syllabus. One of them asked applicant universities if their course syllabi included specific items (e.g., grade evaluation method, required hours for preparation). The other item asked if the applicant universities had instituted a system to closely monitor the content of syllabus drafts submitted by academic staff. The score provided to each of these two items was five points. Applicant universities, then, would get 10 points out of the full score of 95 if they could answer the 2 questions affirmatively. Every year, from 250 to 350 private universities become grant recipients, so this grant program served as an important agent for the standardization of syllabi.

The standardization, which was codified in the form of regulation and reinforced by requirements of grants program, is further reinforced by accreditation requirements. Through the revision of the University Act in 2004, it was decided that all universities must go through accreditation process less than every 7 years. All accreditation bodies require universities to submit their syllabi in the audit processes. In addition, the accreditation bodies themselves are supposed to get accredited by education minister. It is, therefore, inevitable that accreditation bodies apply audit requirements, which are similar to the MEXT’s own items, to applicant universities. Accreditation bodies, then, have participated in the micromanagement of universities by the MEXT.

III From Means-End Decoupling to Means-End Reversal

Shirabasu as a Prop for Window-Dressing

Observing the increasing institutionalization of syllabus, as shown in Fig. 2, one may surmise that the educational reforms in Japan have attained a considerable success. The impression will be reinforced if one finds the increasing standardization of syllabus’s format, content, and style of statements. In fact, if syllabus is truly a panacea that has a tremendous potential for assurance and enhancement of the quality of university education, its widespread diffusion and standardization may augur well for the future of Japanese higher education. It appears that at least the MEXT believes so in view of the fact that the ministry has continued to include the items regarding syllabus in the application form for the GGRPU. However, the institutionalization of course syllabus at a university does not necessarily mean improved
quality of education at the university. The same stands true for the relationship between syllabus’s standardization and educational reform. While the ratio of universities making the construction of syllabus mandatory may be easily gauged by a questionnaire survey, it is quite difficult to measure the quality of education using the degree of standardization of syllabus as an indicator.

In fact, the proliferation of gigantic syllabus booklets from the early 1990s through the early 2000s suggests the possibility that the institutionalization of syllabus was largely decoupled from the quality enhancement of university education. Voluminous syllabus booklets may be an effective prop to present an appearance of a university with high quality education. However, it ironically suggests that the appearance is just for impression-management or window-dressing. In fact, as early as in 1997, the University Council warned that universities should clearly distinguish between a course catalogue and syllabus for each course. The Council also argued that a syllabus should be made to fit to the distinctive characteristics of each course (University Council [1997] 2002 : 312, 316). The fact that essentially the same argument was repeated in the Central Education Council’s report in 2008 and in 2012 suggests that a syllabus booklet continued to be used as a prop for window-dressing for more than 15 years (CEC 2008 : 21  ;  2012 : 15).

Pervasive Means-End Decoupling in Japanese University Sector

In the first part of this essay, we learned that a similar means-end decoupling can be found in the treatment of PDCA as an all-purpose management cycle: the PDCA has been also treated as a sort of panacea that is applicable to almost any type of HE (higher education) reforms. Means-end decoupling regarding the PDCA can be seen clearly in the following comment by a university professor at TG University (pseudonym):

It’s only to make up plausible-sounding documents. All of a sudden, at a faculty meeting, we were told that we need to insert a sentence or two including the term [PDCA] in all documents. There was no explanation about that before the meeting. They told us that it is just fait accomplis and because the MEXT and the DK Accreditation Association [pseudonym] said so (Sato 2019 : 240).

In a booklet published from the DK Accreditation Association (pseudonym), the TG University was mentioned as an exemplary university where the idea of PDCA has been firmly institutionalized. Yet, according to a professor of the university, many of his colleagues
do not know even the term “PDCA.” At other universities as well, it often happens that very few university academics know the term.

A similar thing can be said of the three policies (degree policy, curriculum policy, and admission policy) that were addressed in the first part of this essay (Sato 2020: 15-18). Ever since the Central Education Council (CED) featured the 3 policies as the key to the internal quality assurance of university education in 2016, almost all Japanese universities and their departments codified their own policies regarding conferment of academic degrees, curriculum management, and admission of enrollees. It was supposed that PDCA cycles should be applied to all of these three policies, and every course should also be managed in a PDCA-cycle manner as well. Yet, if one asks university academics in Japan about the three policies of their universities or departments, very few of them would be able to answer to the question. A few academic staff would not even know what such “policies” mean after all.

Quite recently, another twist was added to this already vacuous “policies” set: Japanese universities are now required to codify their “assessment policies” at a university-wide level as well as at the level of each department or school. Those in charge of coordinating curriculum management are now busy in codifying the assessment policies and making up explicit guidelines for grading students’ achievements. Ruuburikku or rubric (evaluation rubric template), another loanword from English, is a favorite term introduced by the MEXT as the crucial device to assess students’ achievements and to show that every university has an explicit measure to grade marks and confer academic degrees. However, in this case again, very few academics pay careful attention to the rubric templates constructed by their university or departments. Many of them, again, do not even know the term “rubric.”

In all of the abovementioned cases (i.e., shirabasu, PDCA, three policies, assessment policies, rubric), one can find a considerable decoupling between what is supposed to be a means for reform and what is theoretically to be achieved by such means. Such a means-end decoupling often leads to a means-end reversal, in which the adoption of a reform measure becomes an end in itself, and most of the tasks in a university are conducted just as “business as usual.” Terms and acronyms borrowed from the business world and loanwords from English are quite convenient props to cover up the reality of means-end reversal under the guise of innovative reform measures.

Means-End Reversal: The MEXT’s Case

In the preceding sections of this essay, we have examined the instances of means-end decoupling or window-dressing at the level of higher education institutions (HEIs). The
window-dressing technique has been employed to circumvent the administrative pressures of the MEXT. It may be interesting to note that the MEXT itself has employed a similar type of means-end decoupling and eventual means-end reversal. Just as HEIs have often resorted to some form of window-dressing or other, the MEXT for its part has done its best to give the appearance that it has tackled university reforms in real earnest and attained considerable achievements.

Fig. 3 is a typical example of such means-end decoupling found in MEXT’s official documents.

These figures are obtained from a MEXT’s website reporting the achievements of the GGRPU program during the 5-year period between 2013 and 2017. The four graphs illustrate the changing ratio of those HEIs that had introduced specific reform measures. Dotted lines show year-by-year changes in the ratios of all applicant universities, while the solid lines represent the changing ratios of those universities that could receive the GGPRU grants. For example, as for the “course numbering,” in 2013, only 27 percent of the all applicant universities have introduced the course numbering system. The ratio steadily went up year by year and reached 75 percent in 2017. In the case of recipient universities, the ratio was 88 percent.

Source: MEXT (2018)
http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/02/05/1340519_408.pdf
One can see from the four graphs that the change in the ratio is much faster with recipient universities in the cases of other three reform measures as well. Therefore, the MEXT would reason that the reform policies are actually quite effective in reforming education and learning at Japanese universities. In fact, the selection committee chairperson of the grants program mentioned the increase in the ratios as a promising sign showing remarkable reform and urged other universities to adopt such measures (MEXT 2018).

This type of reasoning is obviously erroneous as well as misleading because what are shown in these graphs are actually nothing but external indicators that can be easily measured. On the other hand, they do not show the extent to which original reform goals were actually attained. For example, the fact that the ratio of those universities adopting course numbering increased does not necessarily prove that the quality of education at the universities was improved by the course number system. Nor does it necessarily mean that education at the universities not adopting the system was considerably inferior to the HEIs adopting it.

In any case, we can discern here a means-end decoupling that is similar to the ones that are found in the case of HEIs’ evasive and defensive reactions to the reform policies. The HEIs’ reactions are largely based on an important characteristic of the reform policies: most of them have been imposed on HEIs in a top-down manner and often do not take account of the actual situations that universities and their staff confront. Moreover, the MEXT’s own decoupling between reform objectives and specific reform measures is based on the ministry’s need to respond to audit pressures. Although it is a mindless exaggeration to call them the “third-rate ministry” (Terawaki 2013), the MEXT is certainly near the bottom of the hierarchical government bureaucracy (Aoki 2019). In the “pecking order” of audit regulations, the MEXT has to deal with various types of reporting obligations. For example, the MEXT has to report progresses in university reforms to the Japanese government. They also need to report the achievements of educational reforms to acquire certain amount of budget from the Ministry of Finance (MOF). These pressures probably have led to the situation in which urging HEIs to adopt seemingly effective reform measures, rather than achieving actual reforms becomes an end in itself for the MEXT (The issue of the cross-pressures that the MEXT has to deal with will be taken up shortly).

IV Decoupling and Colonization

HEIs’ Typical Reactions to the Auditing Requirements

Most of the HE reform policies in Japan have been perceived by university staff as
external pressures imposed upon them in a top-down manner. In fact, only a few reform measures are conceived and implemented by the university staff themselves. They are not even based on their innate needs. To make matters worse, many of the policies are inconsistent and mutually contradictory (Yamaguchi 2017; Fujimoto et al. 2017).

Ikuo Amano, a former professor of University of Tokyo and well-known specialist in higher education research, commented as follows in his book titled *Reconsidering University Reform* [Daigakukaikaku wo toinaosu] (2013):

Policymakers do not have any clear vision or long-range planning for the future of Japanese higher education. As a consequence, a series of reform policies that are partial, piecemeal, and essentially nothing but stoppage measures have been proposed and implemented one after another in response to the drastic changes in social, political, and economic circumstances. In many cases, universities are urged to introduce specific reform measures in exchange for public grants or subsidies (Amano 2013: v).

Amaono further argues that reform policies and their consequences tend to form a vicious circle. He believes that policies that have been proposed in a rough-and-ready manner are accompanied with a variety of side effects and cause considerable confusions within each HEI and in Japanese university sector as a whole. The confusions and side effects, in turn, have made policymakers forge another reform policy that is again nothing but a stoppage measure. It comes as no surprise, then, that university staff resort to defensive and/or evasive reactions, if they want to contain, within a tolerable level, the damages incurred by misplaced and inconsistent reform policies. What is called “gaming” or gaming-the-system tactics on the part of Japanese universities and their staff is nothing but such reactions. The gaming tactics are also aimed at neutralizing the MEXT’s micromanagerial monitoring.

*(Self-)Colonization as an Alternative*

Not all universities and their staff have adopted defensive or evasive stance toward the MEXT’s micromanagerial “reform audit.” Some of them, on the contrary, have almost completely surrendered themselves to the ministry’s directives and even become faithful believers of reform ideologies and specific reform measures. For example, a great number of articles and pamphlets have been published, addressing the ideal format and effective use of syllabus. In fact, the syllabus guidebooks that have been distributed at many Japanese universities may have been written by those academic staff who firmly believe in the intrinsic
merits of standardized syllabus.

Similarly, a great number of seminars for PDCA-style management have been held both in the form of inter-university workshop as well as faculty development meeting at each HEI. For example, since 2008 the Japan Association of Private Universities and Colleges has been hosting an inter-university seminar aimed at learning PDCA management. Every year, approximately 30 universities and more than 50 staff members participate in the seminar to learn the essence and specific techniques of PDCA-style management. It is quite plausible that the participants in such seminars will serve as faithful believers or missionaries at their own universities. Some of them may even serve as instructors for the seminars or workshops organized at other universities.

Employing Michael Power’s terminology, such a conformist stance toward the official reform ideologies may be characterized as “colonization.” (“Self-colonization” may be a more appropriate term, if one focuses on the process in which those who are to be “colonized” often conform to the official values and norms rather willingly.) Power, in his much-acclaimed *The Audit Society* (1997), identified decoupling and colonization as two extreme possibilities of “audit failure.” According to Power, in the case of decoupling, audit fails in attaining its intended aims since the audit process is “compartmentalized in such a way that it is remote from the very organizational activity”. In the case of colonization, audit fails when the reporting demands for the audit process lead to side effects that undermine organizational performance (Power 1997: 95). For example, the standardization of syllabus may end up in unintended side effects such as the loss of flexibility in teaching and learning. The micromanagerial style of monitoring the content and format of syllabus may utilize considerable energy and resources that can be otherwise devoted to truly effective education and innovative research.

**Combinations of Decoupling and (Self-)Colonization**

As Power suggests, decoupling and colonization are two extreme cases and hard to exist in their pure forms. In fact, it is quite difficult to maintain a uniform and consistent stance toward reform ideas at a university level because a university comprises multiple departments and various types of staff members. As a consequence, there can be a variety of mixed reactions to the reform ideologies. Especially, since academic staff tend to have autonomous professional ideology, complete colonization may be almost impossible at many universities. For example, in a previously quoted statement, an academic at the TG university, which was mentioned as an exemplary case of PDCA-permeated institution, stated that he and
other staff regarded it just as a window-dressing.

On the other hand, many of the so-called idokanshoku (transfer officers), who move around different national universities or between the MEXT and national universities as mid- or upper level administrative officials, tend to be loyal devotees to the official reform ideologies. They often serve as active promoters of government-initiated reform ideologies and specific reform measures within each national university. The same can be said of those ex-MEXT officials who have taken jobs in private universities after retirement. Many of them assume higher-ranking positions in private universities such as the director-general or vice-president. Some of them even become university presidents. Both the transfer officers and ex-MEXT officials serve as the agents of colonization at universities. To use a rather harsh metaphor, they are “colonial secretaries” embodying the schemes and wills of the colonial master, i.e., the MEXT.

These cases suggest the possibility that those at different levels of organizational structure of the university show different reactions to institutional pressures related to reform policies. For example, in the above-mentioned case of the TG university, it is plausible that while PDCA-related colonization occurs at the university and department levels, decoupling is a typical reaction at the level of individual staff members.

The same is true of the universities where the format and content of the syllabi are highly standardized through a detailed syllabus guideline and close monitoring by committee members specifically appointed for syllabus management. In such universities, staff members who are responsible for curriculum management may be firm believers of the merits of the standardized syllabus. Some other members may also support them out of their own belief in the merits of standardized syllabus. Most other academics, however, may be skeptical about the merits of syllabus as a teaching device and teach their classes without actually using the syllabi that they were forced to submit to the database of the university’s course management system. In such a case, there is an almost complete decoupling between the standardized syllabi and the teaching practices in classrooms.

**Substantiation (Jisshitsuka) of Reform Measures**

It appears that the pervasive decoupling with some trace of colonization is the most typical situation at Japanese universities as far as the HE reforms are concerned. This is symbolically epitomized by the term “substantiation” (jisshitsuka), which has been frequently used in the policy documents issued by the MEXT and CEC. Substantiation, in this case, means an attempt to give substance to reform measures that have been almost completely
decoupled from their original purposes and therefore have become dead letters.

“Substantiation” first appeared in a University Council’s report published in 1998. In the report titled “Japan’s Universities in the 21st Century and the Directions of Future Reforms,” the term was used 11 times, and 4 objects were supposed to be “substantiated,” including among others, credit hour system, evaluation system for education and research, and university’s management advisory board. The number of references to “substantiation” increased to 16 in the case of a CEC report published in 2008: this time targets of the substantiation included items such as faculty development (FD) and articulation between high school education and university education. Nowadays, the term “substantiation” can be frequently found in the documents issued by accreditation associations and universities themselves. In addition, the references include a great number of things; e.g., internal quality assurance system, self-check and self-evaluation, three policies (diplomat policy, curriculum policy, and admissions policy).

It is ironical that many of the intended targets of substantiation are measures that were originally proposed as innovative and effective measures to “substantiate” some system or rule that had lost substance and existed only in names. For example, the formulation of the three policies was proposed and hailed as the measure having remarkable effects in making university education more consistent and coherent. Yet, the fact that the three policies are nowadays frequently mentioned as among the most important targets that are to be substantiated frequently suggests a possibility that these policies tend to be decoupled from actual educational practices. In fact, only a few Japanese university staff members would be able to recall correctly the three policies of their own universities or departments. Many of them would say that these policies were formulated mainly due to the orders given in a top-down manner by an accrediting organization and the MEXT.

Mismanagement Cycle between Substantiation and Substance-losing (Keigaika)

In Japanese, an antonym for jisshituska (substantiation) is keigaika, namely substance-losing. One of the distinctive characteristics of the HE reforms during the last three decades is an endless cycle alternating between jisshituskais and keigaika, i.e., substantiation and substance-losing. In fact, almost every time a certain problem in Japanese HE system was identified (e.g., curriculum structure lacking consistency and coherence, flaw in academics’ teaching skills), some measure was proposed as an effective solution or wonder drug for the problem (e.g., three policies, faculty development (FD)).

We learned in the first section of this essay that syllabus was diffused in a relatively
short period, in less than ten years. Similarly, many other new reform measures have been instantly institutionalized at universities all over Japan, largely due to the institutional pressures coming from various sources, including the MEXT, accreditation associations, and inter-university associations. Yet, the new measures were adopted in many cases just for window-dressing. In other words, one could even say that the new measures had lacked substance from their start. When such a substance-losing was brought to light, another measure was required for substantiation.

This situation, extremely reminiscent of cat-and-mouse chase, is symptomatically revealed in a flood of new terms or catchphrases, many of which are loanwords from English. In fact, the series of the terms we have seen in the previous part and sections of this essay (i.e., syllabus, PDCA, three policies, KPI, Super Global Universities) is only a tip of iceberg of a great number of such English-sounding reform-related terms. The following list shows only a part of such terms:

AO (admission office), AL (active learning), assessment policy, assessment plan, benchmark, COE (centers of excellence), course numbering, curriculum tree, curriculum map, FD, FDer (faculty developer), GCOE (global centers of excellence), GD (good practice), governance, GPA (grade point average), IR (institutional research), IRer (institutional researcher), learning portfolio, office hour, rubric, RA (research assistant), SD (staff development), TA (teaching assistant), ST ratio, URA (university research administrator)

To Japanese people (including policymakers and laypeople), many of these terms, expressed in alphabet or as acronyms, sound quite fashionable. They may also appear as “silver bullets” or miracle drugs for the chronic problems afflicting Japanese HE system. Some of them, like in the case of PDCA, may even appear as a versatile solution to almost all symptoms that the ailing Japanese universities suffer from. Loanwords from English or their acronyms are quite effective in Japan in conjuring up an image of wonderful measures.

It has often been indicated that the relatively short lifecycles of buzzwords in the business world suggest the limited utility of the nice-looking ideas expressed in such fashionable terms (cf. Birnbaum 2000). The same notion holds true of the proliferation of “reform jargons” or “reform buzzwords” in Japanese university sector. Indeed, it also symbolically shows the limitation inherent in the reform ideas that are imposed upon universities in a top-down manner. In fact, any reform ideas that are not grounded in the daily
practices of university education will rarely lead to an effective management cycle but will end up in a “mismanagement cycle” of substantiation and substance-losing.

V General Background of the Ubiquitous Mismanagement Cycles in HE Reform

Dearth of Government Expenditure on HEIs

The first part of this essay (Sato 2020) addressed the PDCA cycle as a typical example showing the situation in which misplaced model-learning from the business world has caused great confusions and troubles in Japanese HE sector. In this part, we learn that the same is said of the syllabus and other curriculum management models borrowed from the HE sectors in other countries, especially the US.

Arguably, one of the important reasons that the imported models have been rarely effective to “substantiate” education at Japanese HEIs is the dearth of public support to them. Fig. 4 shows government expenditures on HEIs as percentage of GDP in OECD nations.

As evident from this graph, Japanese universities receive the least government support in terms of the percentage of GDP, and it was less than a half of the OECD average in 2015. It should also be noted that this ratio has been almost consistent during the last three decades. Dearth of public support to the HEIs is, indeed, one of the crucial backgrounds of the huge

Fig. 4 Government Expenditures on HEIs (2015) as percent of GDP

Source: OECD (2018)
gap between the overexpectation and underinvestment, which was described in the first part of this essay.

*Lip Services over Thirty Years*

This financial problem has not been unnoticed by Japanese government. On the contrary, both the University Council and CEC have emphasized the need of increased public support to HEIs almost every time they issued a major report concerning university reforms. As early as in 1991, a report by the University Council included the following statement:

As compared to the other advanced nations and also in comparison to this nation’s size of economy, Japanese fiscal support to higher education is far from satisfactory. It is, therefore, desirable that the authorities concerned closely examine the present situation of universities and make a serious attempt to increase the government expenditures for higher education (University Council 1991[2002] : 225).

Similar argument was repeated in subsequent reports issued by CEC. For example, all of the CEC’s major reports issued in 1998, 2000, and 2005 repeated the following statement in a “copy and paste” manner—“government should pay their best effort to increase the public expenditures in higher education to the level of western nations.” Similarly, as late as in 2018, a statement suggested “we need to secure necessary amount of public support to higher education” in a report titled Grand Design for Higher Education toward 2040 (CEC 2018 : 48-49).

Despite these repeated arguments, government expenditure in higher education has not been increased during the last three decades. As indicated in the first part of this essay (Sato 2020 : 10), the block grants to national universities were decreased by more than 10 percent during the period between 2004 and 2015. As for support to private universities, the ratio of the government subsidy to the total ordinary expenses of universities has been reduced during the last three decades and reached less than 10 percent (9.9 percent) in 2015, while it was 29.5 percent in 1982.

The dearth of public support to universities has made many of the university reform programs essentially nothing but make-shift measures. Therefore, the whole implementation of reform policies tends to become not a truly effective management cycle but an ineffective and extremely inefficient mismanagement cycle of substantiation and substance-losing.
Crowded Policy Landscape:
Why the MEXT is always One Step behind “NEXT”

Policymakers as “Policy Meddlers”

Another twist has emerged to this already ironical situation during the last 15 years: the number of those who are involved in the policymaking process of HE has mushroomed beyond the reasonable control. Many of the new participants have little experience or expertise in higher education or educational policies. Nor are they in positions to take any responsibility if their advocated policy ideas eventually lead to disastrous consequences. In that sense, “policy meddlers” rather than policymakers should be a more appropriate term in characterizing their stance toward Japanese HE. Due to the great number of policy meddlers involved, the policy landscape regarding Japanese HE system and its reforms is now extremely complicated or “crowded.”

In former days, the policy landscape was rather simple and straightforward. The MEXT was largely responsible for the planning and implementation of reform policies. The ministry’s bureaucrats often used the University Councilor Central Education Council as a camouflage to add legitimacy to the policies they themselves made (The councils often included university academics as major members). The MEXT also sometimes cooperated with a number of Diet members (Diet backers) who had certain interests in educational ideologies or education business or both. However, quite often, the MOF had the final say regarding which policies got publicly budgeted.

The situation has changed rather drastically since Shinzo Abe took office as the Prime Minister in 2012. He often uses his own advisory committees to make general frameworks of the educational policies. The advisory committees include, among others, the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (CEFP), Education Rebuilding Implementation Council (ERIC), and Council for Science, Technology and Innovation. Since such private advisory committees include business leaders, the policy framework is often closely related to economic and industrial needs. As a consequence, the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) have assumed greater power in deciding the overall directions of educational policies.

The Cabinet Office and METI, together with Prime Minister Abe, nowadays form an

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2 For example, only 5 out of 22 members of the Education Rebuilding Council have some expertise in educational matters, and none of them were specialists in educational policy.
inner policy circle which is, in many ways, insulated from the broader government (Mori 2019). Thus, the MEXT and the CEC often become a kind of sub-contractors who are supposed to implement the policies that are provided in a top-down manner (Kawasima 2018: 146-147). The MEXT, then, has no other choice but to follow faithfully the decisions that have been already made elsewhere. In other words, the MEXT is destined to be always one or more steps behind “NEXT” movements in the major policy circles.

The situation is further complicated as Prime Minister Abe tends to use his own private advisory board in many policy areas. A great number of policies have been proposed by these various committees. They often reflect mutually conflicting interests. Consequently, as is said in an English proverb “Too many cooks spoil the broth,” educational policies sometimes become a patchwork including mutually conflicting and inconsistent interests and concerns. The universities and their staff, for their part, are compelled to decode “real intentions” or “real meaning” of such policies and specific reform measures.

The Case of Entrance Examination Reform

Quite recently, the inherent flaws of the crowded policymaking process received wide public attention owing to the serious confusion regarding the reform of the preliminary entrance examination. The National Center for University Entrance Examination (Daigaku Nyushi Senta: DNC), an independent administrative institution supervised by the MEXT, is chiefly responsible for the planning and implementation of the standardized examination that is conducted once in a year in mid-January. The scores of the preliminary examination are consulted as crucial information for the selection of enrollees by almost all national and public universities. Most private universities also use the scores for certain categories of examinees. Every year, more than 400,000 high school students or graduates take the exam. The number of examinees sometimes exceed 600,000.

The nation-wide preliminary examination was first started under the name of Common First-Stage Examination (CFSE) (Kyotsu Daiichiji Gakuryoku Shiken) in 1979. It was renamed as National Center Test for University Admissions (NCTUA) (Daigaku Nyushi Senta Shiken) in 1990. One of the important models of this standardized examination was the US Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Like the SAT, the NCTUA is intended to evaluate the basic scholastic aptitude of examinees. Most of the national and public universities, therefore, conduct their own entrance examinations separately in late February or mid-March and use the scores in

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3 Unlike the SAT, the NUTUA is conducted only once a year, except for a supplementary examination for those who could not take the exam due to illness or for some other reasons.
combination with the NCTUA scores to decide which examinees are to be admitted.

In its more than 40 years of history, various modifications have been added to the preliminary examination. For example, while only national and public universities could participate in the CFSE, private universities were allowed to use the scores after the exam was revised and renamed as NCTUA. Subdivisions of subjects were also frequently changed. Another significant change was introducing the listening comprehension testing for English in 2006. Despite these changes, the basic testing method has remained the same. Like in the case of the SAT, Japanese preliminary entrance examinations adopted the multiple-choice style: examinees are supposed to mark one correct alternative out of a number of alternatives.

This multiple-choice testing method was one of the major targets of criticisms raised by those who claimed the essential reform of the preliminary entrance exam. Critics argued that the multiple-choice method was not suitable for evaluating examinees’ ability to think critically. Similar criticisms were repeated in the discussions at the ERIC, one of the Prime Minister Abe’s private advisory committees. In 2013, the Council eventually advocated the introduction of new preliminary examination in its reports. One of the major changes in the exam was the introduction of written tests in the national language (kokugo) and mathematics. Another major reform was the use of the scores of non-governmental English tests (e.g., TOFEL, TOEIC) as a required information for admission decision; it was argued that the existing preliminary examination was inappropriate for evaluating “four skills” in English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

While the new examination, including these changes, was supposed to be launched in 2021, the education minister, all of a sudden in November 2019, announced that the MEXT had decided to postpone the use of the scores of non-governmental English tests. The MEXT had also decided to postpone the introduction of the written examinations in the next month. In the background of the abrupt changes and ensuing nation-wide confusions, especially among high school students and their parents, strong criticisms were raised from high schools regarding the feasibility of fair evaluation of written examinations in a massive scale. Many English education specialists were also critical of the MEXT’s dubious arguments about the comparability of different non-governmental English examinations (Torikai 2018; Haebaru 2018).

“Clouded” Policymaking and Collective Irresponsibility

The arguments regarding the confusion about the new preliminary examination

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4 For differences between national language (kokugo) and Japanese language (nihongo), see Yeounsuk (1996).
attracted nation-wide attention, and various news media reported the problem as a special feature article. Through the vehement arguments, it was revealed that the details of the policymaking process leading to the initial decision concerning the new preliminary examination were not clearly documented. Even if there were certain documents (e.g., minutes of committee meetings), most of them had not been made public. One of the reasons of the lack of disclosure, according to MEXT officials, was that “if disclosed, it would hamper open discussions.” (In response to the criticisms, the MEXT began to disclose parts of the information only reluctantly.) It was not clear, therefore, who decided what at what point of time. Consequently, it was not evident who was ultimately responsible for the failure and confusion regarding the aborted plan of the new examination.

Although the most important element was arguably the ERIC’s 2013 report, various parties including CEC and its subcommittees were involved in the decision-making processes. MEXT officials had no other choice but to come up with a great variety of opinions and arguments at such variegated councils and committees (Nikkei Shimbun, Dec. 22, 2019). Consequently, the resultant plan for the new preliminary examination ended up in a sort of patchwork.

Therefore, even if complete information is disclosed, it would be almost impossible to identify who is ultimately responsible for the decisions regarding specific matters. What Masao Maruyama, a renowned political scientist, called “system of [collective] irresponsibility” as a distinctive characteristic of Japanese government in prewar period has been kept almost intact after the WWII, and bureaucratic organizations are structured in such a way as to lessen the burden of individual responsibility regarding decision-making. In fact, most of the government bureaucrats are not provided individual offices, and policy-related decisions are made collectively in a large open room with many desks and chairs (Omori 2006; Shindo 2019; Cf. Trevanian 1979 : 147).

Similar is the case of the decision-making process at the meetings of various government-commissioned councils. A cursory examination of a part of the meeting is enough to observe that in many cases council members are expected merely to authorize the conclusions that have been already made by bureaucrats (Arata 2010 : 15-16; Shindo 2019 : 64). In fact, it frequently happens that a bureaucrat’s “lecture” occupies about one third of the

5 While it is a fictional presentation, the following account in Travenian’s best-selling novel Shibumi illustrates this situation: “Its [Japanese civil government’s] systems were static and mired because grafted upon the Japanese propensity toward overorganization and shared authority designed to lessen the burden of individual responsibility for error were elements of alien democracy that brought with them the busy inaction characteristic of that wasteful form of government” (Trevanian 1979 : 147).
“discussion” in the meetings. Even if a council member’s opinions are included in the lecture, they tend to become a patchwork of various opinions that often include inconsistent elements because bureaucrats make every effort to include as many opinions as possible (Yoshimi and Kariya 2020: 93-95).

The “crowdedness” of the policy making process often leads to its “clouded-ness,” i.e., invisibility of decision-making process. It is quite ironical that mieruka (visualization) has been used as one of the buzzwords of recent administrative reform: visualization, PDCA, and EBPM (Evidence-Based Policy Making) have formed a triad in the policy discourse about administrative and fiscal reform during the last decade in Japan. For example, one can find the following paragraphs in the Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2018 issued from the CEFP, again one of the Prime Minister’s private advisory committees.

As for subsidies for the operating expenses of national university corporations, the government will promote the establishment of the PDCA cycle, visualize in-school allocations and the way money is spent, and increase the share of strategic allocations (Cabinet Office 2018: 95).

For science and technology areas, the government will make efforts to establish evidence for budgets, perform visualizations that include costs and results, promote the switch to Evidence Based Policy Making (EBPM), and improve the quality of its budgets (Cabinet Office 2018: 96).

It remains unclear whether any kind of visualization is possible if the decision-making is conducted in a foggy or clouded environment.

VII Concluding Remarks

In February 2020, a symposium titled “Reflections on the HE Policies after 2020: How to Materialize the Grand Design Report” was held at a university in Tokyo. The symposium was sponsored by the Japanese Association of Higher Education Research and featured a CEC’s 2018 report, in which visions of the Japanese HE toward 2040 were presented. The leaflet for the symposium, especially its pictures showing the speakers and panelists, symbolically reveals a number of characteristics of the policy discourse in Japan regarding HE.
The leaflet announced as follows, “We will explore the mid- and long-term future of Japanese HE policies on the basis of the CEC report ‘Grand Design for Higher Education toward 2040’.” This announcement would sound slightly strange if one examines the leaflet more closely. Around the middle of the poster are pictures of one keynote speaker and other five panelists. The keynote speaker was the president of national university. He was also the president of the Japan Association of National Universities as well as the chairperson of the subcommittee of university of the CEC. The panelists included a former president of the Japan Association of Public Universities, former president of the Federation of Japanese Private Colleges and Universities Associations, and a former president of the CEC. The other two panelists were professors of the university that hosted the symposium. One of them was the president of the Japanese Association of Higher Education Research, and the other was a former Deputy Director-General of the MEXT.

This lineup of panelists might have been a reasonable choice because various types of vested interests in Japanese HE policies were well represented. Yet, the lineup otherwise seemed to include serious problems, especially its diversity regarding age and gender: all of the panelists were males and looked relatively old. In fact, their average age was 68, and 2 of them were 73 years old. It seems quite unlikely that many of them would be active participants in Japanese HE scene in 2040. (The same applies to myself: I am 65 years old now.) Even if we admit that there is some truth in the saying “The older, the wiser,” one should have had different representations. For example, there should have been female panelists as well as at least one non-Japanese panelist. There should also have been younger panelists who would be active teacher/researcher at universities in 2040, thereby would witness actual consequences of their visions and opinions. Only by guaranteeing such diversity of the participants in policy discourse, policymaking process in Japan will become more transparent and “visible.” Indeed, otherwise, any reform measure may eventually end up in another instance of means-end decoupling.

Addendum: On Ponchie in Japanese Policy Documents

One of the distinctive characteristics of the official documents issued by Japanese ministries is the frequent use of so-called ponchie or “Punch picture.” The original meaning of ponchie was a satirical illustration in Western style. Yet, it came to be used as a generic term in the business world referring to conceptual diagrams. The term later diffused to the public sector, especially to ministries and local governments. Most Japanese bureaucrats have probably used the term without knowing its original meaning. This rather nonchalant use of
the term and the simplistic content of many *ponchie* reveal a fundamental flaw in policymaking process in Japan.

The term *ponchie* was originally adopted from the title of an English cartoon magazine titled *The Japan Punch*, which was launched in 1862 in Yokohama (*ponchi* is a phonetic corruption of “punch”). Charles Wirgman, a London-born journalist came to Japan as a foreign correspondent cum illustrator in 1857. He later settled in Yokohama and started publishing a magazine that became popular among English-speaking residents in Yokohama. The magazine was named after a British weekly magazine *Punch; or, The London Charivari*. Like its British predecessor, *The Japan Punch* often featured satirical illustrations criticizing Japanese politics and society.

It is quite ironical, therefore, that Japanese bureaucrats use the term *ponchie* in referring to the conceptual diagrams they use to illustrate the outline of public policies. Although pictorial diagrams help to understand the complicated conceptual relationships, most of the *ponchie* conceal rather than clarify the complicated relationship involved in policy issues. At times, *ponchie* oversimplifies issues that need far more careful treatment. A typical example has been illustrated in Fig. 5 shown in the first part of this essay (Sato 2020: 17). While insets of the twin PDCA cycles in the figure seemingly show the ideals of the “three policies” quite clearly, this *ponchie* conceals a number of complex problems included in the very idea of PDCA.

Another problem inherent in the *ponchie* in policy documents is its evasive stance. Most of the *ponchie* figures are presented as *imeijian* (provisional image) or *tatakidai* (a basis of discussion) and never completed. One could say that one presented *ponchie* as a tentative visual “image” or as a basis of discussion and might evade their responsibility when the policy eventually fails. On the other hand, the policy documents, including such provisional “images,” have been provided to universities and their staff as policy guidelines to be followed. It appears that they are expected to “decode” certain hidden messages that are implicated in the half-intelligible (and half-unintelligible) pictorial diagrams.

Japanese bureaucrats’ overreliance on *ponchie* itself, then, can be an apt target of *ponchie*-style satirical illustration…

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6 A similar idea holds true of the English version of the *Japan Revitalization Strategy*. Since 2014, when it was made public, the English translation has stayed as “provisional.” The same applies to the English translations of a series of the governmental strategy subsequent to the first one.
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