Universities in an Era of Post-Corona “New Order”

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Since the beginning of 2020, the global spread of the coronavirus has caused a sudden disappearance in both supply and demand of goods. This had a major impact on the macroeconomy and corporate management. Our lifestyle is about to change drastically, and companies and universities have changed their work styles by moving to remote work and online meetings. In this memorable year, which also marks the 70th anniversary of IAU, I focus on how universities should be in an era of post-Corona “new order” from a Japanese perspective.

Restrictions on entering campus have been in place since the beginning of the academic year at my institution, Meiji University. All ceremonies and physical activities, including the admission ceremony, were suspended, and all classes were moved online. Besides, the virus has had a great impact on the number of international students, which had increased sharply at Japanese universities in recent years and reached some 230,000 in May last year according to JASSO statistics (JASSO 2020). Due to cross-border travel restrictions, the exchange programs have been suspended, and the economic problems of privately funded international students and Japanese students have become apparent.

Teachers were suddenly forced to give online lectures since the beginning of this academic year. We have three types of online lectures: (1) document/assignment presentation, (2) on-demand (recorded video distribution of lectures), and (3) real-time delivery (simultaneous interactive). According to a survey of students at our university conducted in May 2020, on-demand and real-time delivery lectures were highly evaluated, while the lectures consisting in document/assignment scored low in student preference. In particular, on-demand lectures received an outstandingly high rate of satisfaction (by 85% of students).

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The reason for the latter is that students can repeatedly listen to lectures anytime and anywhere and that the communication between teachers and students is easily secured (on-demand lectures use a university system platform, real-time lecture delivery uses chat functions to communicate), and the teachers use student input to improve their class and lecture style. Online classes make the “quality” of lectures visible. Indeed, one can see immediately whether the lecture on a certain subject is well organized, whether it is based on previous research, and whether it captures the essence. On the other hand, there are many complaints from students due to the number of assignments they have to comply with, which means that the students spend much more time studying each subject.

I participated in various discussions regarding the quality assurance of university education at the Ministry of Education. One thing that has always been pointed out is that “Japanese university students do not study”. There are reasons for this, such as the fact that university grades are not as relevant for finding a job or students’ economic issues, that students spend a lot of their time in part-time employment, but it is still a fact that Japanese university students have extremely little weekly study time compared, for instance, to American university students. The significant advantage of online education was, I think, that the students could devote much more time to the lessons and had to treat them more seriously. Many students avail of the university online system and actively ask their teachers questions, and online lessons had a certain effect on “independent studying”.

In addition, it confirmed that communication between teachers and students is of crucial importance in education. In online classes, as mentioned above, there is a chat function for real-time interaction and even for presenting teaching material, a means for communication between faculty and students through the university web system. By using them, many questions could be asked in one lesson, which would further improve the quality of the lectures and the learning experience. In other words, it was reconfirmed that the lectures are made up jointly by lecturers and students, which in turn improves the quality of lectures.

Furthermore, although exchange programs were suspended from the fall semester, it was decided that student and faculty exchanges would be conducted online. It is expected that the exchange of high-quality classes and the development of more debate among students will have an incredibly positive effect on students and staff. During the recent closure of Japanese universities, a transition to fall enrolment, which had been considered already in the past, was considered once more. This is because classes starting from April were initially suspended at all educational institutions. However, considering that the Japanese system would have to change also for spring admission, it appeared exceedingly difficult to change the academic calendar, even during this emergency period.

Regarding the impact on academic research, a number of issues were raised as a result of a survey shared among the researchers and conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in May this year. These included, for example, restrictions on access to research facilities, library closures, delays in ordering and delivery due to shrinking administrative systems, restrictions on researcher communication including those overseas, pressure on research time

through online classes, problems with securing graduate students due to the difficulties encountered in finding jobs and decreasing international students. Regarding the research community, however, webinars are becoming popular, and research communication at international online meetings and academic societies have become easier than before. Research gates© and other means of scholarly communication with foreign researchers are also showing significant progress.

Looking at Japan’s science and technology strength in terms of papers published, Japan was in the top three until 2013 (World Bank 2020). Now, China is growing steadily, and the number of papers published by Japanese researchers is far behind China. Especially in Japan, the number of internationally co-authored papers has not grown as significantly as in China. These are currently being discussed by various parties, and activating the flow of researchers at research universities, the expansion of regular faculty positions, promoting joint appointments at universities and private companies, and cooperation with international top schools and Japanese universities are specially required and should be promoted.

Regarding science and technology policy in the post-Corona era, the government is currently formulating the 6th Science and Technology Basic Plan (2021–2026). We are discussing the structural reform of the social system infrastructure to realize Society 5.0, Japan’s model leading contribution in the post-Corona “new order” (MEXT 2016). For example, the following is being developed: intense investment of public funds in science and technology, the creation of a resilient society and informed response to pandemics, the construction of data-oriented social structures, and expanding investment in humans as a source of value creation from knowledge and data. Universities have a large role to play in contributing to such science and technology policies.

Finally, universities are asked to focus more on social responsibility and on the sustainable development goals (SDGs). According to one US newspaper article (Wirz 2020) in recent years, top schools in the United States have “divested” in the fossil fuel industry, partly driven by students and alumni associations. Universities are very influential, and although there are similar movements in areas such as pension funds, universities are being criticized for being overly involved in political issues or that such engagement would reduce the actual returns on investment. Albeit, the role of universities in promoting the SDGs is now extremely large in the world.

There are more than 70 Japanese universities that are members of the Academic Impact initiative of the United Nations¹). Many of those are also members of IAU, and have declared their commitment to research, education, and social contribution in conformity with the ten principles of the United Nations (United Nations 2020). These are also connected to the 17 SDGs and help universities make a great contribution to solving social issues.

For example, Meiji University has been focusing on internationalization as an “open university”, and at the same time has actively engaged in global issues such as environment, sustainability, poverty, and human rights protection while promoting

¹For further reference, please see: United National Academic Impact, Japan: <https://en.academicimpact.jp> (26.08.2020).

further sophistication of education and research. The university has a responsibility to contribute to problem solving also for these kinds of global issues and has been making various efforts so far. For example, it is working on human rights issues in collaboration with Human Rights Watch, has held a symposium with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), opened a museum for peace education named the Noborito Research Institute,² and is holding a symposium on tackling environmental issues. In this way, it is even more important in the post-corona era that each university builds its own model, like the Japanese model, and cooperates with companies to promote social contributions.

IAU also regularly exchanges views and information through its extensive work on Sustainable Development, and, in cooperation with UNESCO, it offers essential support to their member universities. IAU is committed to strengthening cooperation with these universities in the future and to promoting such efforts at universities worldwide. I think it is one of the most important and distinguished efforts of the Association.

Congratulations on the 70th anniversary. I wish IAU a bright future and I am convinced it will continue to play an active role in promoting strong and quality university education and research, in strengthening its role in the international community and having an active role in accompanying the development of the Members' university systems.

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² For more details, please see: Noborito Research Institute: www.meiji.ac.jp/cip/english/institute/noborito.html (26.08.2020).

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