Differences between Japan and the United States:
One hundred things that could be improved at the University of Tokyo

The University of Tokyo faces tremendous challenges as it undertakes to choose new leadership. I have been here for more than six years, and I see fundamental improvements that can be carried out to let the university rise to its full potential. Below I summarize a number of views about higher education that are the norm in the United States. Because US universities consistently rank at the highest levels, these deserve consideration. Perhaps some of these could be adapted for use in Japan. I realize that the selection process for a new President by committee screening followed by faculty voting is set, but there should be an attempt to adapt this.

I teach a seminar on “Creativity and Originality”, and a part of that deals with overcoming objections. One of the things that I teach is:

“Rules are to be broken” (As long as it’s not illegal, unethical, or immoral)

For every new idea, there is almost always someone who objects, because of ingrained beliefs, fear of the unknown, or entrenched interests”

“It’s too radical.
“That’s contrary to our policy and rules.
“It won’t work in our university.
“There is no precedent.
“It would be impractical.
“We don’t have time.

Everybody resists change, but sometimes you need to embrace it.

Below are my comments:
The Role of the President

The President of the University holds the key that can release the potential of the university. Up to now at the University of Tokyo the President has held office for relatively short terms, with limited power, and little time to undertake fundamental reforms. This is very different from academic institutions in the United States where the President may serve for over ten years, and who can carry out substantial systemic changes. A relatively young, charismatic individual who can communicate effectively with faculty and staff as well as government officials, corporate sponsors, and influential alumni is desirable.

1) The President should promote a campus that is open to academic freedom, with tolerance for all non-violent ideas, and should inspire a spirit of improvement and true innovation at every level.

2) The President of the university should establish a ten-year strategic plan, and a five-year implementation plan, with possibilities of yearly adjustments.

3) The President should work closely with the Vice-presidents and Deans of schools to prepare these plans.

4) The President of the university should obtain approval for these plans from an independent university board. The President of the university should report periodically to the university board.

5) The President should establish a Committee of One Hundred, composed of distinguished individuals from academia, industry, government and the arts to give advice and counsel.

6) The term of the President should be at least five years, renewable with approval of the board.

7) The President should be the best available candidate in Japan (not the Univ. of Tokyo!), and should have administrative experience abroad, and should be young enough to serve for at least two five-year terms (i.e. 55 or younger).

8) The President of the university should not have any other external posts, but should receive an international level salary.

9) The President of the university should work to improve the low level of university finances, and should use principles of cost/benefit analysis to make decisions.

10) The President of the university should work towards the raising of tuition levels to international levels, coupled with the establishment of scholarship programs to assist the needy. Proper communication with Mombukagakusho, politicians, and the media will likely be needed. Look at the examples of Oxford and Cambridge, which had low tuition levels 20 years ago.

11) The President of the university should establish a world-class level endowment fund. The money can be obtained from those companies who have benefited from hiring our world-class students.

12) The President of the university should have more and better relations with the alumni of the university and their families, and or companies. Establish a separate university unit to stimulate a vibrant alumni association which can help with fund-raising.
13) The President of the university should write an annual bilingual report, with a full budget of the university, but also more frequent short communications to the entire campus about the state of various initiatives.

14) The President of the university should work to improve the low quality of teaching at all levels by moving towards more compensation, rewards and recognition. Merit based salary increases should be the norm.

15) The academic level of the university should be improved by subscribing to international certification programs at the department, school, and university levels.

16) The President of the university should have the right to select candidates for all the important academic administration posts (Vice-presidents and Deans) so that they can work as a team.

17) The President of the university should have the right to establish budget levels for each school in accordance to the needs and performance of each school. Factors that should be considered are the number of graduates from each school, and the amount of overhead/donations the school brings in to the university.

18) The President of the university should strive to increase average levels of faculty salaries to international levels.

19) The President of the university should encourage all faculty, especially assistant professors, to take sabbatical leaves to foreign countries to expand their horizons, freshen their research, and to learn what true competition is. Currently, assistant professors are used as useful lackeys to senior professors, and think that if they take a leave they will lose their place in the promotion line. The assistant professors should be given a measure of independence and encouraged to go abroad for a period of time.

20) The President of the university should have the ultimate power to set salary levels and to promote/demote individuals throughout the academic and administrative system, although routinely these will handled at lower levels.

Professional administration

As is the case of the President, the deans of the various schools hold their positions for relatively short times compared to those in the United States. They have little time and resources to undertake fundamental improvements. The greatest benefit they receive is the honor and status of the position.

1) The Deans of each school should be appointed by the President of the University from a selection of candidates presented by each school, who have been chosen in an open competition that includes public speaking. The individuals should not necessarily be internal candidates from the Univ. of Tokyo.

2) The Deans may conduct research, but at a level commensurate with their main administrative responsibility.

3) The Deans should serve for a period of 5 years, at the pleasure of the President, renewable by mutual agreement, and should be evaluated yearly by the office of the President.
4) The Deans should develop 10-year strategic plans and 5-year implementation plans for their respective schools that are in harmony with those of the university, but which carry out substantive reforms.

5) The Deans will be responsible for conducting periodic assessments of the school, with the help of an independent external Advisory Board. The Board should be a rotating body selected from high level individuals from academia, industry, and government. Appropriate budget for travel, meetings and honoraria should be available.

6) The Deans should have the right to select Department Heads from a selection of individuals approved by the department, who have been chosen from an open competition. The individuals should not necessarily be internal candidates from the Univ. of Tokyo.

7) The Deans will be responsible for conducting yearly evaluations of Department Heads.

8) A responsibility of the Deans should be to engage in fund-raising for their schools, by writing grant proposals, approaching industry, sponsoring paid sports, and cultural activities, and developing close ties with alumni.

9) The Deans should have responsibility for setting budgets for each department based on merit.

10) The Deans should have the right to set salary levels and to promote/demote individuals at the school level, and give special prizes and rewards at the school level, although routinely all salary levels and promotions will handled at the department level.

11) The Deans should receive international level salaries and should have appropriate budgets for staff, free hosting, travel, hiring, etc.

12) The Reppinkan support system of the School of Engineering is very good, but could be reorganized to handle more tasks, like compliance and safety. It’s help with grant proposals is outstanding.

Department level administration

1) The Department Heads should be chosen by the Dean from a selection of internal and external candidates chosen by the department. The Department Heads should work closely with the Dean to move forward university and school programs.

2) The term of a Department Head should be 5 years. Research activities are encouraged.

3) The Department Head should receive 3 months salary for the efforts, as well as sufficient budget for secretary, free hosting, travel, hiring, etc.

4) The Department Heads should develop 10-year strategic plans and 5-year implementation plans for their respective department, which are in harmony with the plans for the university and the schools.

5) The Department Head should organize a retreat (two-day meeting outside the university) involving full, associate and assistant professors to prepare the plans. The costs should be paid by the Dean of the school. A facilitator is encouraged for the discussions, who could be a professional or a volunteer from the school of management.
6) The Department Head will be responsible for the administration of the department, including dealing with staff and students.
7) The Department Head will be responsible for conducting periodic teaching evaluations of the performance of all teaching staff. These will be carried out with assistance by professors of the department.
8) The Department Head will encourage all faculty to participate in Faculty/Staff development activities.
9) The Department Heads will be responsible for a yearly review of the assistant/associate professors that will result in a written report summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of the individual in research, teaching, and service.
10) The Department Heads should have the right to set salary levels and to promote/demote individuals at the department level, and give special prizes and rewards at the department level.

Staff

1) The staff of the university are professionals and should have an independent appraisal/merit review process to set salaries and promotions.
2) The staff will have yearly performance reviews carried out by the appropriate supervisor in conjunction with the appropriate academic administrator (Dept. Head, Dean).
3) The staff will be encouraged and given time to participate in Faculty/Staff development.
4) All new staff should have accredited English fluency credentials and computer literacy.
5) There should be a box in every office, labeled “Suggestions for improvement”. People inside and outside should be encouraged to give suggestions. (This includes the department offices, libraries, university cafeterias, restaurants, hotels, everything.)

General strategy

1) There should be three ladders for advancement at the university: research, teaching, and service. Research should be at the highest level in a world-class ranking, and should be nationally and internationally recognized. Teaching should be substantive, and should be reflected in high teaching evaluations and peer reports. Service should be exemplary, and should move the institution forward. Excellence in at least one of these three areas should be rewarded.
2) Concentrate on the important things.
3) Devolve power to the lowest possible level.
4) For example, all Master and Doctoral dissertation procedures and approvals should be carried out at the department committee level together with the Dept. Head. No need to involve the entire department faculty to read the thesis abstract out loud, or to give approval to a thesis. No need to involve the entire school with departmental matters such as doctoral theses and
hiring. The entire school can and should be involved in entrance and graduation ceremony formalities, as these are a show for the parents and supporters of students.

Establish an electronic university

The universal presence of faculty secretaries is a glaring sign of inefficiency and wasted resources. This is not found in universities abroad. The cost of the secretarial help is the equivalent of a postdoctoral associate, and puts the university at a large disadvantage compared to its competitors abroad.

1) A professional support unit for campus wide computer/software service, teaching, program development, secure email, digital signatures, triplicate backup, and cybersecurity should be established.
2) An initial reduction of 50% of paperwork should be mandated.
3) The use of inkan, a 19th century relic, should be abolished. Nobody can guarantee them, storage of paper is expensive, and cyber signatures can now be made secure.
4) All university procedures should be web-based and simplified (See following).
5) Make it easy to create and remove listserves (email lists), for example for classes so that professors can contact students directly with class announcements. UT-mate is not adequate.
6) Create a modern secure university web platform (e.g like in US universities)
7) Use on-line software to streamline course organization, provide class notes, give quizzes, make announcements. In the US programs like “Blackboard” are common and very useful.
8) All orders for supplies should be webbased.
9) All administrative and personnel hiring procedures should be webbased.
10) All general information and procedures should be webbased. An easy-to-read, bilingual “Handbook” should be available on-line that details every single procedure and requirement in the university.

Meetings

1) Meetings should include really important information only, and should be reduced in time and frequency.
2) Ending times of meeting should be announced ahead of time, and meetings should not be allowed to go on forever.

Finances

From a financial standpoint the University operates like a socialist country. This is seen in that the faculty and administration have little actual regard for finances, the recovery of costs, the reward of individuals who contribute financially to the university, and the allocation of funds in an economically justifiable manner. It would be desirable to have more consciousness about finances at every level from the university to the schools to the departments. More cost/benefit analysis is needed.

There is a need for more funding. Among the possibilities.
1) Increase tuition levels to international levels.
2) Increase fees to recover costs, for example for university admittance applications, computational-intense classes, laboratory classes, art classes.
3) Only allow companies which give substantial yearly donations (oku level for large companies) to enter the campus. Do not allow OBs and OGs to visit groups to carry out recruiting.
4) Create educational software that can be marketed.
5) Create mass media educational programs that can be broadcast for profit.
6) Organize alumni fund-raising events. (e.g. on-campus reunions every 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 etc. years) Start the tradition of a class gift (monetary) to the university at special times (10 year, 25 year). The concept here is that graduates have received much more from their education at the university than they ever paid in tuition.

Entrance examinations and qualifications

Entrance examinations created by faculty and administered by faculty/staff are a waste of resources and have no equal in universities in the United States. They take up a lot of time and energy and put the university at a disadvantage compared to other institutions abroad. The losses probably amount to another 10%. What is tragic is that similar efforts are duplicated in universities throughout Japan multiplying the losses for the country as a whole.

The types of students admitted to the university are uni-dimensional. They are studious characters who are good at memorizing, but who have sacrificed a lot of outside interests and activities. Creativity and originality have been screened out by the selection process to enter the university. There are too many who have psychological problems, and cannot cope with life when faced with obstacles. We need to graduate more well-rounded individuals to lead the nation. Look at Harvard, Princeton, Yale.

1) Admissions to the university should be completely redone in order to increase the diversity and richness of the student body. They should be handled completely by a separate professional unit, as in other countries, so that the faculty can dedicate themselves to what should be their main lifework: research, teaching, and service.
2) Emeritus and retired faculty should be encouraged to participate in admissions work, and should be appropriately compensated. These individuals should not be from Todai alone, but from the entire country and abroad.
3) The entrance exams should be re-engineered to go to a full web-based system, using existing standardized exams where possible, coupled with interviews.
4) Portions of the admissions systems, especially the web-based parts, should be universalized so that they can be used throughout Japan, and so that the university can profit financially from their use.
5) The test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) or other test (TOEIC) should be mandatory.
6) The timing of the exams should be flexible so that all students from Japan and elsewhere can apply. We want the best students. Currently, Tokyo and Kyoto seemingly conspire to share students.
7) Application for the University of Tokyo should include a non-refundable fee to cover all costs.
8) Entrance to the university should consider special qualifications (sports, music, writing, volunteerism, background) and should include an essay.
9) Entrance to the university should consider recommendations from teachers, coaches, mentors, collaborators, friends, or anyone chosen by the student.
10) Interviews should be conducted by professional staff, retired faculty, and alumni.
11) Graduate school entrance examinations should also follow the same principles. Entrance exam committees waste valuable faculty time and energy, and put the university at a disadvantage compared to other universities abroad by as much as 10%.
12) Standardized exams should be used as much as possible, including many available in English.

Faculty/staff development

1) Although there is a so-called FD program at the university, this is in name only, and a proper program to improve the capabilities/effectiveness/skills/time management/abilities of staff and faculty are needed.
2) Establish a separate department of Faculty/Staff Development. Encourage retired/emeritus faculty to participate, with proper compensation.
3) Encourage all faculty, but especially young ones to take sabbatical leaves. The young people should not be promoted unless they have applied for and obtained independent funding for a sabbatical leave in a foreign country. Preferably for two years. Currently, young people are used by their superiors. The young people think that if they leave they will be “lose their position in line for promotion”.
4) Teach courses to Faculty/Staff with web-based tools.
5) Partner with a Japanese company like Fujitsu, and others, to require all students to have a portable computer system.
6) Pay for the computers from the tuition.
7) Establish a campus wide open Wifi system for students/staff/faculty/administrators.
8) Encourage the faculty with the help of the university computing unit to develop advanced teaching methods using portable computers. In the United States active learning methods have been documented to be much more effective for education. Have you heard about clicker? What about red hat?

Global campus

This is an excellent initiative on campus. More should be done.

1) In order to graduate the students with the best possible training for a global economy, the campus should become truly bilingual, with Japanese and English as the official equal languages.
2) The quarter system should be reconsidered. In the US movement is toward semesters.
3) All staff members to be hired from now should have certified abilities in English.
4) All academic promotions should include mandatory certification of proficiency in English.
5) At least 50% of classes should be in English by X years.
6) All documents should have English versions.
7) All students should be required to a course on computer/software engineering.
8) All students should be required to take a course on oral presentations.

OK, its not quite 100. But this is an open list, and you can add to it. Soon there could be 1000. Any comments please in English to oyama@vt.edu.

Biographical Sketch

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