

International Research Strategy at Okayama University

岡山大学での国際研究の戦略について



A convenient and powerful tool to implement, in Japanese Universities, an international culture of best practices in the field of research

Providing strong momentum towards a recognized international profile



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- This report addresses the implementation of an International Research Strategy at
Okayama University from April 2014 -
Implementation is ongoing in 2020, Pr. Makino is Okayama University President and Pr. Nasu Executive VP of Research.

Forewords**

F-1 The nature or "*raison d'être*" of higher education lies in teaching, learning, and research.

Today, however, the purpose of higher education is a contentious issue. The university's commercial turn has not only undermined the authenticity of higher education, but has also begun to dissolve the academics' 'corporative consciousness.' It will take wise academic leadership to restore the authenticity of higher education and the autonomy and spontaneity of the educative and scholarly community in the current university setting. The paper finds the idea of the university - as it has developed from ancient Greece through modern Germany to today - is vital to restoring the authenticity of higher education.

** Abstract of a paper by Professor Dong KIM from Okayama University (2020) " Upholding the Idea of the University in Times of Changing Higher Education" (ISSN 1883-0234) Vol. 12 pp.1 – 24, 2020.

F-2 This document is an activity report covering a 7 year working period at Okayama University. In the URA division. It is built in such a way that elements of a strategy of international development of a Japanese University are also introduced. As Japanese universities are frequently working in similar modes, it can be used by a range of them.

Bernard Chenevier,
Okayama, October 2020

Abstract

For many years, there have been numerous attempts by the MEXT Ministry (shortened from Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports) to help Japanese Universities to keep pace with the international developed nations.

In 2013, shortly after he became the leader of the Cabinet, Prime Minister Abe expressed his wish that within 10 years, 10 Japanese universities would be in the top 100 of the ARWU Shanghai (Jiao Tong) ranking. In 2020, only 3 of them are in the top 100, and it is clear that the ranking of Japanese universities continues to be significantly off target. There are several reasons for this. Reforming universities and observing the effects of the changes is a very slow process overall, and Abe's time scale was likely much too optimistic. In the past, similar statements were done at the top level of the government, but international specialists in higher education and academic research noticed that each time meager results were then obtained. And as a sad continuity effect, in 2020, it is obvious that there is no significant improvement in the international ranking of Japanese universities despite Abe's wish. The longstanding decline is still at work even though Japan is recognized as a country having a highly educated population. This is revealed, for instance, by the PISA assessment process: 'Program for International Student Assessment' *. The number of Japanese Nobel Prize laureates in physics, chemistry, etc., is quite comparable, at least in the period 2000 - 2020 to most advanced countries (except the US, however, which is much higher).

In this context, in early 2014, I got a secondment at Okayama University (in the best 12-15 universities in Japan), from my position of CNRS, as a senior scientist with a mission of URA (University Research Administrator), to contribute the research development of the university. By doing so, the global international attractiveness was expected to improve and, as a result, preliminary recovery could be expected.

I relied on my background of CNRS scientist, and research manager as well, to implement at the university an original approach relying on concrete elements that helped to promote its research and educational programs. This report shows that I obtained substantial achievements. All of them are a consequence of a single and sustainable strategy: I applied a fairly classical method, the Humboldt ** model used, for instance, at Johns Hopkins University in the USA, that I adapted to the Japanese environment and academic culture.

This document reports on the outcomes of this work at Okayama University. Another main outcome of this work is that the main conclusions could feed into the thinking of Japanese decision-makers, responsible for university development policies.

In this report I detail the various programs I have implemented by following a central idea: to place scientific research at the core of the strategy, selecting only highly flexible programs which rely on peer to peer relations with researchers, and having light administrative requirements. The first phase consisted of a substantial groundwork study of the university's research potential, building up a large but relevant database of research highlights. From its interpretation, I could concretely promote projects that associate Okayama University with 40 prestigious institutions in Europe and North America. My work path also included the creation of a number of international research consortiums where Okayama University is a major partner. As a result the number of prestigious research and education institutions solicitating Okayama University to partner in international consortiums is gradually increasing. They contribute significantly to the improvement of the international image and profile of the university.



In the last section, the document also proposes an option (the POLE project) intended to consolidate this new impetus of the university and to ensure - from 2022 - the succession of my position in terms of 'international strategist' but also more specifically having Japanese commitment. The ultimate objective of POLE is to significantly increase the production of large scale research consortiums and to further improve and stabilize the international profile of the university.

This report finally shows that via the use of a new mindset, obstacles to development of Okayama University and beyond towards many Japanese Universities, can be lifted and new hope of recovery is permitted. Providing that professionals of research, and research management, work in a flexible peer to peer mode with the researchers, this upward trend can be made sustainable. To observe a significant up-grade of global ranking, a time scale of 10-15 years is necessary. In this way, the implementation of a long-term sustainable strategy, relying on high-quality research associated with highly relevant graduate programs, will be successful.

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* See for instance the article "Japanese 15-year-olds rank high in math, sciences, but reading down: PISA exam" of the Mainichi Shinbun - <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20191203/p2a/00m/0na/014000c>.

** The concept of holistic academic education (compare Bildung) was an idea of **Wilhelm von Humboldt**, a Prussian philosopher, government functionary and diplomat. As a privy councillor in the Interior Ministry, he reformed the Prussian education system according to humanist principles.