

# A response to Paul Stapleton's “Japanese universities: Change or risk marginalization”

## Paul Stapleton氏の「日本の高等教育での教員評価について」の反応

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**P**aul Stapleton's well-written systemic critique of Japan's higher-education institutions (“Japanese universities: Change or risk marginalization”, *TLT* 35-5) was a comparative argument based on general principles. Unfortunately, his analysis suffered from a lack of context.

Since Citations are given the highest weight, faculties publishing research with the highest citation numbers will raise the ranking of the university. Japan's universities' low numbers in this area reduce its position in the overall rankings (Appendix. 2). However, THE recognizes the shortcomings of its own methodology. Some exceptional papers cited widely the year of publication create an outlier effect, since co-authorship disproportionately raises the score in small institutions with low publication volume (Baty, 2011).

### Rankings: What do they show?

First, his use of “marginalization” in the title: He appears to be referring to the low performance of Japanese universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) Ranking tables (Times Higher Education, 2011) compared to Hong Kong where he currently works<sup>1</sup> despite its much smaller population (Appendix 1). By ranking lower, the reasoning goes, Japanese universities will have difficulty attracting students in the global education marketplace. Two discussions are in order here: one involves a closer look at THE rankings, and the other is the idea of ranking itself.

THE rankings are decided statistically according to several variables given certain weights (Fig. 1). The three most important variables are Citations (32.5%), Research (30%), and Teaching (30%).

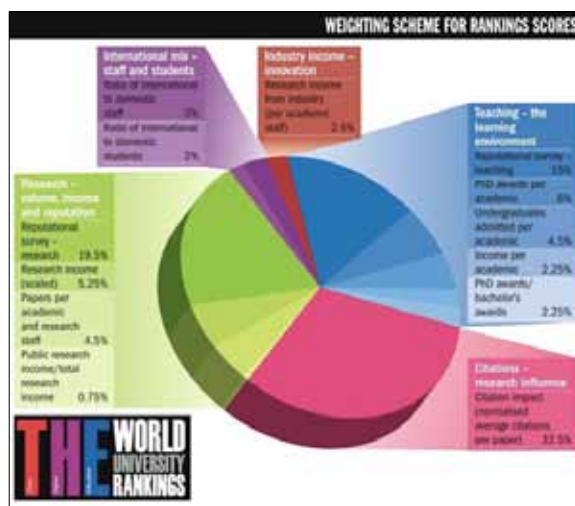


Figure 1. THE Weighting Scheme for Rankings Scores

Let's consider the other important variable of Research (Appendix 3). Here we see that Japanese universities do very well and compete with universities in the top twenty. Why these articles are not cited at such a high rate merits investigation, but Japanese academics are in fact publishing in large volume in prestige journals according to data from Thomson-Reuters, so these are not "in-house" publications. Japanese universities also compete very well on the Teaching ranking (Appendix 4) based in part on the number of students per teacher. This data suggests "overall" rankings do not always accurately predict the learning experience of the student.

### The creed of excellence

Furthermore, THE Ratings are in general problematic because universities are immensely complex institutions that cannot be given a magic number and placed on a scale. However, their short history since 2004 reflects a trend in higher education encouraged by global capitalism that is governed by a nebulous concept Bill Readings termed the "University of Excellence" replacing the "University of Culture":

The university has no particular goal, except to have its various parts functioning excellently—where excellence becomes a countless measure permitting homogenization and bureaucratic control.... In practice, excellence is connected with professionalization: you are judged by your peers, which means that excellence is determined by how you are rated by others (Culler, 1999 p.344).

Achieving "excellence"—versus creating a cultured and informed citizenry—is now considered so ineluctable that the number one institution, Harvard, devotes considerable resources in its pursuit. According to an article fittingly titled "Excellence, not mere reputation" (Baty, 2010), it regularly collects data in "strategic areas" and "benchmark(s) their performance on objective criteria...to improve their ratings" (emphasis added).

In discussing "job performance", "quality assurance" to insure that grades are "fair", and customer-satisfaction surveys in the form of

student evaluations, Stapleton's current institution appears to have adopted similar methods. I believe that faculty review is necessary and positions should not be abused as sinecures; however, when mechanisms insuring "excellence" in the name of rankings encourage faculty to homogenize approaches to education, universities risk having their function as places where new ideas are generated, not just standardized, depleted.

### The challenge of "practice"

Stapleton makes another statement in need of context. "Moribund practices," he writes "more focused on hierarchy and procedure than merit and efficiency" is in part responsible for the sharp decline of Japanese studying abroad. Logically, this appears incoherent: Wouldn't unfavorable practices *encourage* students to go abroad? Actually, this problem regards economic policy, not universities: The domestic job market currently is very tight, and students must begin to search earlier and longer to compete. This reason for reduced numbers appears in his Japan Times reference (Editorial, 27 Dec, 2010) and is conceded in similar stories in major US science journals (Normile, 2010; Editorial, 9 July 2009).

Stapleton singles out "decision-making"—committee meetings—as one example of "moribund practice". In making his comparison, I wish that Stapleton provided more information: Were meetings in Japanese? Are meetings at his current institution in English? This impacts the level of personal involvement in the process. In addition, having received his doctorate in the UK Stapleton may feel more at home at his new institution due to the legacy of the British education system on Hong Kong institutions. In contrast, Japanese universities are more "home grown" and produced from a different set of traditions (see Amano, 2005). The culture of consensus will not change easily. Nevertheless, meetings at his former institution sound trying even by national university standards; however, it is precisely because it is a tax-funded national university receiving public money that procedure is adhered to so uncompromisingly. This can be considered a form of accountability that Stapleton so admires in his current institution.

### The future: Corporatism vs. care

This response is not meant to excuse nor deny issues in the university system here. Certainly, criticism is beneficial to any system or institution because none are perfect, and Stapleton's experience within Japanese academia gives his opinions weight. The truth is research universities are interesting places to teach and was one reason I changed institutions domestically. I concede THE citations data, albeit problematic, deserves attention. He raises other excellent points, for example the importance of using research funding to employ graduate student research assistants, and that expenditures should be proctored. This latter point seems especially cogent now given the urgency of the rebuilding effort after the March disasters. In addition, I wholly agree more should be done to attract foreign students to Japan to reach the Education Ministry's G30 targets.

Where I disagree with Stapleton is how the "quality of the educational experience" can be improved to attract students in the global market. He appears to favor applying corporate principles to the faculty. This may improve rankings, but has a questionable connection to the campus learning experience. Instead, the general campus environment effectively can be a "selling point" when it supports students personally and emotionally, as well as academically. The student welfare research field in Japan is new compared to other countries, but institutional practice positively affects student academic performance (Moses, 2006). Japan's universities, by integrating student support services on campus (see Lebowitz, Asada, & Hori, 2010), would do much towards improving their future viability.

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### (Endnotes)

- 1 Stapleton's bio states his present school is "in the region". The title indicates he intends the scope of his critique to encompass general practice in Japan. While his institution's name can remain confidential, the location should be identified because he is making a comparative analysis and it is necessary to identify the basis of his comparison.

**Appendix 1. THE World University Rankings 2010 (Top 20 + Japan, Hong Kong)**

World Rank	Institution	Country/Region	Overall score
1	Harvard University	United States	96.1
2	California Institute of Technology	United States	96.0
3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	95.6
4	Stanford University	United States	94.3
5	Princeton University	United States	94.2
6	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom	91.2
6	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	91.2
8	University of California Berkeley	United States	91.1
9	Imperial College London	United Kingdom	90.6
10	Yale University	United States	89.5
11	University of California Los Angeles	United States	87.7
12	University of Chicago	United States	86.9
13	Johns Hopkins University	United States	86.4
14	Cornell University	United States	83.9
15	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich	Switzerland	83.4
15	University of Michigan	United States	83.4
17	University of Toronto	Canada	82.0
18	Columbia University	United States	81.0
19	University of Pennsylvania	United States	79.5
20	Carnegie Mellon University	United States	79.3
21	University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	79.2
26	University of Tokyo	Japan	75.6
41	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	Hong Kong	69.0
57	Kyoto University	Japan	64.6

World Rank	Institution	Country/Region	Overall score
111	Hong Kong Baptist University	Hong Kong	55.6
112	Tokyo Institute of Technology	Japan	55.4
130	Osaka University	Japan	53.4
132	Tohoku University	Japan	53.3
149	Hong Kong Polytechnic University	Hong Kong	51.4

**Appendix 2. THE Citation Rankings 2010 (Top 20 + Japan, Hong Kong)**

World Rank	Institution	Country / Region	Citations
1	Harvard University	United States	98.8
2	California Institute of Technology	United States	99.9
3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	99.9
4	Stanford University	United States	99.2
5	Princeton University	United States	99.9
6	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	95.1
6	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom	94.0
8	University of California Berkeley	United States	97.8
9	Imperial College London	United Kingdom	88.3
10	Yale University	United States	91.5
11	University of California Los Angeles	United States	93.2
12	University of Chicago	United States	96.9
13	Johns Hopkins University	United States	92.3
14	Cornell University	United States	88.1
15	University of Michigan	United States	84.1
15	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich	Switzerland	83.1
17	University of Toronto	Canada	82.2
18	Columbia University	United States	92.6

World Rank	Institution	Country / Region	Citations
19	University of Pennsylvania	United States	93.6
20	Carnegie Mellon University	United States	95.7
21	University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	96.1
26	<b>University of Tokyo</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>58.1</b>
41	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	Hong Kong	98.2
57	<b>Kyoto University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>46.3</b>
111	Hong Kong Baptist University	Hong Kong	97.6
112	<b>Tokyo Institute of Technology</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>45.5</b>
130	<b>Osaka University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>40.0</b>
132	<b>Tohoku University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>41.2</b>
149	Hong Kong Polytechnic University	Hong Kong	62.4

### Appendix 3. THE Research Rankings 2010 (Top 20 + Japan, Hong Kong)

World Rank	Institution	Country / Region	Re-search
1	Harvard University	United States	98.7
2	California Institute of Technology	United States	98.0
3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	91.4
4	Stanford University	United States	98.1
5	Princeton University	United States	95.4
6	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	93.9
6	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom	94.1
8	University of California Berkeley	United States	99.3
9	Imperial College London	United Kingdom	94.5
10	Yale University	United States	89.7
11	University of California Los Angeles	United States	92.9
12	University of Chicago	United States	87.9

World Rank	Institution	Country / Region	Re-search
13	Johns Hopkins University	United States	89.2
14	Cornell University	United States	88.8
15	University of Michigan	United States	89.1
15	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich	Switzerland	87.8
17	University of Toronto	Canada	87.9
18	Columbia University	United States	73.8
19	University of Pennsylvania	United States	82.7
20	Carnegie Mellon University	United States	79.3
21	University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	71.4
26	<b>University of Tokyo</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>91.9</b>
41	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	Hong Kong	51.8
57	<b>Kyoto University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>77.7</b>
111	Hong Kong Baptist University	Hong Kong	32.5
112	<b>Tokyo Institute of Technology</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>63.4</b>
130	<b>Osaka University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>63.4</b>
132	<b>Tohoku University</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>62.5</b>
149	Hong Kong Polytechnic University	Hong Kong	45.7

### Appendix 4. THE Teaching Rankings 2010 (Top 20 + Japan, Hong Kong)

World Rank	Institution	Country / Region	Teaching
1	Harvard University	United States	99.7
2	California Institute of Technology	United States	97.7
3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	97.8
4	Stanford University	United States	98.3
5	Princeton University	United States	90.9
6	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	88.2

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