

Research Performance Evaluation

The Different Approaches Taken in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan

By Inoguchi Takashi

The Point of Evaluation

WHY does academic research need to be evaluated? The reasons provided will determine how the evaluations are conducted. Some say evaluations are needed in order to examine how much progress has been made in the various academic disciplines, and to gain information on who has completed research or has been promoting research in specific fields. The purpose of evaluation is to record academic and scientific progress. It is irrelevant whether there are people who are interested in these records – the important thing is the examination itself. Others say they need to identify what has yet to be learned and discovered in order to promote research that will benefit society in the future. While evaluating academic performances, we can gather information for the development of policies to promote further scientific and academic work. In this case, the evaluation is regarded as a part of policy formation. Other people say the evaluations are needed for employment-related purposes. Assessing and reporting a researcher's work sends an indirect warning to the low-achiever, encouraging him or her to try harder. This ends up promoting fairness in the area of academic employment, creating a virtuous circle for the benefit of all. There must be a number of other reasons, however, I have selected only three to show the different purposes of evaluation.

Different Perspectives

I have heard and dealt with some of these arguments on a professional level. Let me discuss the United

States first. In the early 1990s, I was a member of the Committee for International Peace and Security, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). This gave me an excellent opportunity to learn about its activities, its objectives and its members. The main aim of the committee was to decide ways of promoting academic research on peace and security issues and implementing them. The committee was composed of specialists in international politics, global security and world peace, as well as chemistry, nuclear physics, biology and area studies. There were around 15 committee members, so not all academic and scientific fields could be covered. Even so, the members were chosen from among the top people in their fields. The committee's functions have included awarding scholarships for doctoral dissertation research, organizing annual workshops on special topics and providing grants for research in specified subjects. The research performance evaluation focused on specific areas to determine scholarships and grants. Applications for fellowships are very thoroughly considered, and the applicants are expected to provide plenty of detail. The length of the application document is not specified. The important thing is to clearly indicate how one's research plans would respect the fellowship's research objectives. The research should ideally reflect some social need or global interest, as well as the individual interest in the special topic. Most themes are quite specific, although there are a few that are more

general. Applicants should also thoroughly explain what perspective and approach they hope to take. It seemed apparent to me that the evaluators favor applicants who indicate a keen desire to pioneer some new area of research, which is a good fit for the SSRC, whose daily activities also aim to pioneer new fields. Although the SSRC's academic evaluation is focused on US research, it also gives attention to research activities around the world. Area studies tend to dig deep into a specific region, so the SSRC asks researchers to expand their focus to include comparisons with the United States and a third country. The assumption here is that this is necessary to avoid problems inherent in a US-centric outlook, to remove any distortion caused by personal bias regarding the selected area or country, and to promote research that yields more accurate results. Here it is worth noting that area research programs in the United States are receiving much less funding than before – the emphasis is increasingly turning to research that compares the situations of at least three countries.

Now let me turn to the United Kingdom. Although I do not have personal experience working with the Economic and Social Research Council, a member and associate of mine has provided a comprehensive report on its activities, with a detailed description shedding light on how the Council evaluates social science disciplines. Evaluation committee members representing different parts of the country select a number of fairly pres-

tigious university faculties, then carefully examine all of the academic achievements of all of the professors at each university. The assessments can run to 10,000 to 20,000 words per university faculty, written conscientiously with care for detail and accuracy, and are signed by each evaluator. At the end of each evaluation, the professor being assessed is given one of four possible rankings: (1) academic achievements can be considered among the best in the world; (2) academic achievements can be considered among the best in the United Kingdom; (3) relatively good research with original features; (4) research lacks ingenuity. Evaluators may suggest that professors who fall into the last category should be transferred to a slightly less demanding university faculty. Each professor awarded one of the other three rankings is also given written advice. Thus, the assessment is a very tough one, and just a few evaluation committee members wield, in their own domain, absolute power of judgment over academics, somewhat like the Tudor or Stuart monarchies, or, as a more recent and most British example, in imitation of Margaret Thatcher.

The Characteristics of Japanese Evaluation

When it comes to Japan, I have participated in university evaluations conducted by the National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation. The institution's most distinctive evaluation approach is its tendency to take a generalized overview of academic research at university faculties – the assessment of individuals is a secondary issue, not nearly as important. The second most noteworthy aspect is that when faculties are assessed, it also examines whether they have been educators using effective teaching methods, whether they have cooperated with the administrations, and whether their activities were pursued for the benefit of society. These

factors are all given equal weight in the evaluation, and the result is a composite assessment that focuses on the group as a whole. Such an approach is also seen at times in the United States and the United Kingdom, but these factors are usually given little consideration when evaluating academic capacity in the West. In this type of evaluation approach, what is important is that there are no losers and, in effect, everyone is deemed to have done well. In the case of evaluating academic research, there are very few differences in the evaluations of faculties and professors when 10 to 20 evaluators are used. The only exception would be distinction of the “university brand.” Big differences occur in such areas as social contribution and political participation. It may be because such factors tend to be reported on record and are easily accessible for consideration. In Japan, it is becoming more common to conduct periodic evaluations of universities, but the “everyone is doing well” approach reminds me of the evaluations given by teachers to elementary-school students who have prepared an exhibition of their work. In both cases, the evaluations are held on a regular basis, everyone joins in, there is a little preparation time, and the result is inevitably “well done, everyone!” Discussions conducted by the evaluation committee do deal with specific issues, but they rarely appear in the report.

Although what I have described from experience and knowledge of the above three institutions is most certainly not a complete guide to academic evaluations, it does, I believe, give a glimpse at the evaluation approaches in the three countries. In the United States, the evaluation of academic disciplines promotes an ideal of research guided through able leadership. In the United Kingdom, it is conducted by a team of distinguished scholars who use their authority to encourage academic progress. In Japan, its aim is to improve the overall performance of a many-faceted group.

Which Approach is Best?

It is hard to affirm which approach is most suitable because the answer would depend on the purpose of the evaluation, and on social and cultural considerations. In Japan, the priority after all is given to employment issues, raising the academic level and comprehensive assessment. Actually, it would seem that employment-related issues have nothing to do with pure academic research, but then again, what research will get done without good working conditions? Most ordinary academics, and most ordinary performing artists for that matter, would find it hard to achieve excellence without a good employment situation. The Japanese penchant for taking a collective approach makes sense, because without improvements in the performance of the academic world as a whole it would be very difficult to raise the level of national academic research. If, instead, critical, individual-oriented evaluations were the norm, some academics might feel like giving up. Japan's academic employment conditions are not the best in the world, but with this approach at least, academic evaluation in Japan has a foundation to stand on. However, it is likewise necessary to promote the energetic, leadership-promoting academic evaluations seen in the United States and the United Kingdom. Some will say that Japan is already doing this, and indeed it is, to a certain extent. The purpose of this article is not to offer praise for the Japanese system but to shed light on other, quite different evaluation techniques that promote the development of new policies for superior academic performance. If these thoughts stimulate efforts leading to improvements, they will have served their purpose. **J.S.**

Inoguchi Takashi is a professor at Chuo University. His academic interests include globalization and cultural differences in democracy, international relations in East Asia, and the promotion of US democracy. His latest books include *Values and Life Styles in Urban Asia* (2005) and *Global Governance* (2004).