

Commentary:

Birth, Growth and Recreation of Higher Education Research Institute

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It is my honor to be given an opportunity to speak after the very insightful presentations by renowned researchers from overseas. I do not think it is possible to add anything substantial to the presentations; I only wish to make some remarks from the perspective of a researcher in higher education who had worked in this research institute at Hiroshima some thirty years ago.

My discussion is about three phases of development for research institutes of higher education such as the one in Hiroshima. They are Birth, Growth and Recreation. I am afraid that it sounds trivial, and yet I think it is worthwhile reflecting upon it.

At first, the birth. The Research Institute for Higher Education at Hiroshima University was created in 1972. This was a period of quantitative expansion of higher education in Japan. The dramatic expansion not only induced various problems in universities, but also social concerns regarding where higher education is going. This social context prompted the creation of a research

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institute at Hiroshima.

It is important to note that it was not only social and political forces that brought about it. In this process, some individuals embodied the social and academic concerns and acted as a catalyst to translate it to the development of the studies of higher education and the organizations to promote it. In the case of Hiroshima, it was Professor Kazuyuki Kitamura. Not only did he have academic insights but also the passion to contribute to the development of higher education. That led to the initiation of higher education research and creation of center of higher education research.

Similar process took place in many countries in the world. Many of the participants present today are in fact those individuals, including professors Altbach, James, Teichler and Marginson.

Next is the period of growth. The institute at Hiroshima expanded in the number of staff members, as others in other countries did, in the 1970s and 1980s. It also meant the expansion of the perspectives of research, from pedagogy at college level into its social, economic and institutional contexts. Surveys on students and faculty members consolidated the analytical basis.

It is important to note that through this process, international network of researchers and research institutes in higher education became wide and active. It is particularly unique to higher education research that international comparison created a significant impetus to develop academic pursuit.

Since the 1990s the focus of development of higher education shifted from quantitative expansion to qualitative changes. This prompted the emergence of a series of new issues in higher education research, including marketization, neo-liberalism, university evaluation, competition, ranking, and so on. International mobility of students under the trend of internationalization also attracted much attention. The scope of higher education research had thus widened.

It is ironical, however, that the growth seems to have created latent problems in higher education research. The widening scope had scattered the focus of the entire field. Meanwhile, increasing specialization and introduction of esoteric analytical method made it difficult to have active conversation encompassing the

whole field. Moreover, the growing emphasis of market mechanisms and competition among universities created the demand for analyses focused on individual institutions, but not for the whole higher education sector. All these factors seem to have undermined the needs and organizational logic of research institutes. Moreover, the trends of diversification and uncertainty erode the belief in the value of organized research. Many presentations today in fact attested that this is not unique to Japan.

Then, what does higher education research need now, and how should the research institute contribute to it? This should lead to the discussion the re-creation of the concept of research institute of higher education.

Many of the presentations today revealed that the context in which higher education research is taking place has radically changed especially in last few decades, which makes the word of survival taken seriously among research institutes. I am sorry to say that I, myself, am not ready to make suggestions in outlaying a plan of re-creation. I would like to just mention one point from my experience as a member of selection committee for a large governmental research grant. My impression in that occasion was that social sciences in general are unable to organize an attractive and large scale research project. This is partly because that we have lost large picture for the purpose and contributions of a research to the society. It is also because fragmentation of research makes it difficult to design a meaningful organization and cooperation among researchers. This is the consequence of marketization in research: the emphasis is laid on competition among scholars, but not on organizational infrastructure. I think it applies to higher education research as well. Then, imagination and organization could still attract some resources. I may be too optimistic, but I still wish to stick to it.

I also want to mention that today's discussion proved that the network that the institute at Hiroshima had built over the last fifty years is a remarkable asset in identifying where we stand and making us think where we go. This should not be lost in air. It is my sincere hope that the able staff, and the affiliated researchers like myself, will strive to re-create the spirit and function of the Research Institute for Higher Education at Hiroshima University.

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Good Luck, RIHE-Hiroshima