The "Post-Coronial" University, Corporatization and Sustainability

Dong Kwang KIM (Okayama University)
Peodair LEIHY (Universidad Andres Bello)
Ian TEO (Australian Council for Educational Research | ACER)
Brigid FREEMAN (University of Melbourne)

Abstract

Japan's National Universities are now subject to "corporate" structures that, by recognizing the universities as legal persons and not simply parts of the state apparatus, aim to more closely follow models in many Western countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted their development of more proactive institutional plans and indeed institutional identities. This study traces and explains vocabulary associated with current challenges for universities around the world, and argues that the broad concept of sustainability is a central theme around which a university may build and sustain an enduring self-image.

Keywords: post-coronial, post-colonial, Japanese National Universities, corportatization, identity, sustainability

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has run through 2020 and 2021 has had an enormous impact on society. For universities, the experience has been extremely challenging, as they found themselves *responding* to and *recovering* from the interruption, and *planning* and *preparing* for emergency conditions (Freeman et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Leihy et al., 2022). As elsewhere in the world, the experience has been a shock for Japanese higher education, including National Universities whose survival is guaranteed but which find themselves increasingly exposed to market forces. Japan's National Universities are now subject to "corporate" structures that, by recognizing the universities as legal persons and not simply parts of the state apparatus, aim to more closely follow models in many other wealthy countries. For these universities, the pandemic has disrupted their development of more proactive institutional plans and indeed institutional identities. This study traces and explains vocabulary associated with current challenges for universities around the world, and ties it to differences and convergences in how universities' corporate identities have formed. The broad concept of sustainability is a central theme around which a university may build and sustain an enduring self-image.

In higher education, "post-coronial university" seems to be a term gaining in use. The term deserves explanation and commentary, as it is a pun that brings together a number of threads in giving a name to emerging challenges to institutional operations and identities. For its part, the Japanese language is notable for its openness to wordplay, particularly when encountering new words from other languages (loan-words [外来語]) and/or needing to name new concepts (neologisms [造語]). For example, the now globally prominent word emoji [絵文字] evokes the English word *emotion* through combining the *kanji* for "picture" and "written character". Many non-Japanese people are not fully aware of the wordplay, but the word has succeeded in replacing the previous term "emoticon", perhaps simply because it sounds more like "emotion". In a similar way, the meaning carried by *post-coronial* may be more expansive than someone first notices. In the medical term *coronavirus* [コロナウイルス] and the now generally critical word *colonial* [コロニアル], *katakana* famously combines the two sounds rendered in the Roman alphabet as *R* and *L*.[1] This neologism helps us to contemplate the effects of these two urgent and ongoing pressures around the world, and how universities reflect such pressures and offer the opportunity to address them.

University of Cambridge globalization scholar Simone Eringfeld took a risk and associated the term "post-coronial university" with her podcast series *Cambridge Quaranchats* [検疫チャット] that began in April 2020 (Eringfeld, 2021).[2] On one level, post-coronial here simply means *after the COVID-19 pandemic*, which of course has been extremely challenging for universities and for society in general. The risqué part is that post-coronial university is a clever and topical pun that makes fun of the resurgent fashion of talking about the *post-colonial university*. The notion that universities are post-colonial, or not post-colonial enough and in need of *de-colonization*, is at the very least thought-provoking. Over the past decade, such terminology has experienced revival and a drifting nuance, not least through association with the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement emerging from Cape Town and Oxford, in which the British imperial businessman, politician and university benefactor Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) is denounced for his exploitation of Southern Africa at rallies around statues that memorialize him. More generally, the prospect of a post-colonial university is a re-evaluation of the heritage of an expansive "Western" influence that spread to the Americas and Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that eventually recognised some centres of Islamic learning as pre-dating the designation of *university* in Europe.[3] To the extent that post-coronial combines the prospects of a world beyond COVID-19 with the allusion to post-colonial movements, Eringfeld conjures up, in a light-hearted way, the idea of overcoming traumatic and yet instructive experiences. The degree to which these issues inform (and can further inform) the identity of Japanese universities will be discussed further below.

At a very basic level, Eringfeld's term refers to something after COVID-19 —post-coronavirus. This is made more satisfying by the play on "post-colonial" —a term that initially arose in the middle of last century to describe the challenges faced by newly independent states that had been part of empires. More recently, however, "post-colonial" has come to refer to the idea of redressing historical unfairness and "de-colonising" such things as education curricula, monuments and historical perspectives. This post-coronavirus/post-colonial combination is attractive, because in different ways colonialism and coronavirus are now viewed as world-changing events. This combination is already a little bit risky, as many people take de-colonising projects very seriously and may be sensitive about any kind of joke that highlights that this is a fashionable issue. There is, however, a further aspect to the pun which is perhaps more subtle especially to those not from an English-language background —in English, the adjective *coronial* is already taken, and refers primarily to the task of investigating and explaining a person's death. The coronial role is important because it provides legal assurance to the community about how a human life has ended. Since we are talking about post-coronial university, however, it is also worth considering how the European university has served as a model for how an institution can have a "corporate" identity —just like a human body. Like a body, a university's corporate health can be assessed (ideally before any coronial inquest is required) in terms of its individual identity and so its contribution to its local community, to national needs (particularly in terms of public funding) and to global challenges. Over the last two decades, the corporatization of Japan's National Universities deepens the importance and sustainability of institutional identity.

The outlook for Japanese universities can be understood as post-coronial too, in the layered sense of having faced COVID-19, of bearing some obligation to understand and allow for colonial and post-colonial experiences, but also for how they are to understand their corporate identities. For National Universities, corporate status is not simply a matter of a different (and often lesser) relationship with public funding, but also a challenge to strengthen their identities and embody a collective mission, ideally advancing the distinctive hallmark of each particular university. For Okayama University, it is sustainability that most clearly presents itself as a way to present a corporate identity —conveniently, reflecting the need to monitor and maintain a unifying project amid changing conditions.

II. The colonial university and modernization

In order to understand the post-coronial university, it is important to understand the connotations of post-*colonial*, and indeed to take some ownership for ambiguous legacy of *colonial* universities. *Colony* is an interesting word, coming from Latin. The term ultimately derives from plowing and planting, as is also reflected in the Japanese 植民地 (increasing preference for the loaned *katakana* adjective コロニアル reflects that, worldwide, colonization is now recognized as violent or at least intimidatory incursions with obvious victims and in any case a problematic topic). In the Roman Empire, a colony was wherever imperial authority had been extended and either Roman citizens had been sent to run farms and other economic activity (or indeed, where it had "planted" people), or the pre-existing locals had been sufficiently romanized such that they were made Roman citizens themselves. A colony means the *right kind* of people —friends, Romans, countrymen— occupying a territory. From the fifteenth century, the idea of colonization became attached to globe-spanning European empires, exploiting resources, including people, in order to enrich and strengthen sponsoring regimes. At its most extreme, colonization denied the very humanity of pre-existing cultures —for example, in many legal contexts the continent of Australia was once deemed to have been *no-one's land* (*terra nullius* in Latin) prior to British colonization, despite containing cultures that had evolved for tens of thousands of years (Kim et al., 2021).

During the final third of a Meiji Era that ran from 1868 to 1912, Japan imitated European powers in establishing overseas colonies. As a further example of the fusion of Western and Japanese practices, Japanese Imperial Universities were established (on the basis of local pre-existing higher education traditions) in the major colonies in Korea and Taiwan. At present, Seoul National University and Taiwan National University, respectively, are of course thoroughly grounded in their own "national" traditions and identities. Furthermore, while they have not yet faced Rhodes Must Fall-type movements, today's Japanese universities are as liable as those anywhere, in former colonies and former imperial centers, to calls to de-colonize their curricula and their treatment of the heirs of once-colonized groups. The extent to which the formative identities of Japanese universities have reflected the Meiji and subsequent modernization drives, of course, makes this especially interesting.

Today, "de-colonizing" means not just a re-evaluation of how institutions approach their own pasts and history more generally, but a determination to leave behind the idea of imposing a particular interpretative lens.[4] And of course that is the major criticism that such a movement faces —that it is too pious and certain about the validity of its own value judgments and too keen in the signalling of contemporary virtues. There is, however, also an academic tradition of querying "mainstream" culture and championing and trusting in diversity. One radical critique of the traditional idea of organizing university education around not only arbitrary, but also historically unjust ideals of what the mainstream is, was William Spanos's work *The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism*. This work was originally drafted as a challenge to general education reforms at Harvard University in 1978, but published in 1993 and revisited more recently (Spanos, 1982; 2015). Spanos explores the conceit of the colonial and of the notion of civilization —and speculates that certainties over a world centered on humanity (that is, humanism) have been giving way to *post-human* existence. Bill Readings would argue that, as such, the university had fallen into ruins (1996), but Spanos saw the challenge as one of embracing diversity, which has since become an orthodox value associated with healthy modernization. A more dystopian account of post-humanism can be found in Shoshana Zuboff's timely study *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019). Zuboff notes a transition from an industrial world depleting ecological resources to an ever more digital existence where our humanity is effectively mined and processed through interactions with information.

Advancing a consolidated national identity has certainly been a feature of Japan's modernization phases —that is, the modernization drive following the Meiji restoration and then the rebuilding after the Second World War, to which we can now add attempts to correct a growing sense of stagnation over the last thirty years. In recent years, Japan has often seemed almost a victim of the success of past modernization projects. It is good to have young people and diversity of experiences, as Japan attempts to imitate other wealthy countries in internationalizing student bodies. At the same time, the demographic pipeline of Japanese school-leavers is not flowing with great vigor. In this context, *sustainability* becomes an attractive maxim. That is, it is increasingly important that universities be informed by concern for their own sustainability—the capacity to go on, well apprised of limitations (and in recent times some private colleges and universities in Japan have indeed ceased to exist due to lack of students). It is certainly noteworthy that attempts to reform Japanese universities in recent years have revolved around attempts to install and naturalize a foreign concept; the *corporate* nature of the institution of the university.

III. The post-*coronial* university and corporatization

Given the effectiveness of Eringfeld's coinage *post-coronial* as wordplay on how COVID-19 has prompted the rethinking of institutional possibilities, it is worth noting that in regular English, the adjective *coronial* customarily means of or pertaining to a *coroner* [検死官]. In matters of human mortality, a coroner is a representative of government authority (called the "Crown" —冠— in some monarchies; coroner comes from a shortening of a Latin title meaning "Guardian of the Pleas of the Crown"). A coroner investigates sudden or suspicious deaths, often overseeing autopsies and such. Particularly, a coronial process provides legitimacy —an official account, as such— to a potentially shocking event, enabling the community in some way to move on. In the case of higher education, it is vitally important that the "post-coronial" university learns from and are seen to have learnt from recent difficulties.

For their part, coronaviruses are viruses that literally seem to have crowns, ringed with spike proteins, just as *coronary arteries* [冠状動脈] are so called because they form a crown-like structure ringing the heart. Confusingly, heart is *cor* in Latin (hence, apple *core*, Earth's *core* and *core* values —literally, their *hearts,* just as we see the same idea in 芯 and 中心); this is not the source of the word *coronary*, though. The notion of a crown —whether this means governmental authority, assessment through a coronial inquest, or the vital structures around a heart that marshal its throughput— provides impetus to the term *post-coronial university* that goes beyond the shocks presented by COVID-19; *post-coronial* in some way suggests a need to take stock following momentous disruption.

By construing the term post-coronial university more fully and bearing in mind associations (however casual) with a coroner's work, it is possible to examine one of the most interesting developments in Japanese higher education this millennium: the emerging identities of Japanese universities. People may not always realize, but when we call something *corporate*, we are saying it is a body. Not exactly like a human body, but conceptually like one —a corporation is an institution whose health must be maintained, at least insofar as its recognition as a body continues. In 1998, Japan's Ministry of Education began planning to convert the National Universities into *legal persons* —法人— an idea borrowed from European law, through the process translated into English (or translated back, essentially) as *corporatization* [法人化: *legal-person-process*]. With hopes of encouraging more enterprising activity, corporatization was implemented for National Universities in 2004. Incidentally, the South Korean and Taiwanese Governments have also pursued the same concept for top-tier public universities.

In medieval Europe, the Latin word *universitas* originally meant any form of social corporation, and a corporation in turn evokes the metaphorical process of making something into or like a body; the Latin word *corpus* means a body, reflected in the English word *corpse* —a dead body. The formula "The corporation does not die" (in Latin, *universitas non moritur*) would become a formulation for how such institutions form and remain "alive" beyond the lives of any particular members (Kantorowicz, 1957). That corporations of students and scholars would come to monopolize the term *university* reflects how fittingly the idea of a legally defined corporate person has served to foment the particular activities around learning that universities conduct. That is to say, ideally people feel part of universities.
In considering the rise of the university, first recorded in Bologna in 1088, Ian McNeely and Lisa Wolverton were careful to point out that the idea of a corporation functioning as a kind of legal person, and of which the university would be the most lasting example, is an invention that is "bizarre to non-westerners" (McNeely with Wolverton, 2008, p. 98). And it is the corporate nature of the university as an organization with its own personality and responsibilities that empowers and requires it to redefine its role for oncoming challenges. The Japanese adoption of the notion of corporate identity in that sense could benefit as much from historical awareness as lateral thinking.

The idea that an institution can take legal responsibility might be viewed as a classic case of borrowing, necessarily harmonized with pre-existing Japanese customs: the nineteenth century principle of "calm [Japanese] essence, sea [foreign] technique" [和魂洋才]. Traditionally, Japanese culture, law and politics invest human leaders with personal responsibility for institutional performance. For example, the end of each of Japan's first two summers of COVID-19 saw a Prime Ministerial resignation, and 2021 would see the ninth Prime Minister in fifteen years. Japan sees more such resignations than most parliamentary democracies, and Yoshihide Suga [菅義偉] is a classic example of a leader controversially fulfilling a key task —the holding of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics a year late, along with denying any relationship with a surge in COVID cases— and then resigning apologetically. University presidents in Japan and other East Asian countries often pay with their resignations for institutional scandals or perceived lack of direction. Sadly, suicide has historically also been considered a way of preserving a continuity between personal and group honor —which is certainly institutional consciousness, but expressed individually. The phenomenon of a leader taking personal responsibility may betray a feature of East Asian culture that demarcates it from Western practices —that is, a preference for personal responsibility above criticizing institutions.

At the same time, especially in the golden era of economic growth (real and on paper) especially during the 1970s and 1980s, Japan gained a global aura as a whole country that seemed to be run like a corporation, with everything seemingly inspired and coordinated. Only a couple of decades back, the world’s business studies textbooks were peppered with explanations of clan-like *kaisha* filling out a grand industrial complex, guided by total quality management [総合的な品質管理] and continuous improvement [継続的な改善]. Famously, a popular 1986 *manga* by Shotaro Ishinomori (石ノ森章太郎) published in translation by the University of California Press in 1988 *Japan Inc.: An Introduction to Japanese Economics* (1988) well illustrates such Japanese practices. To the extent that Japan itself has been promoted in such work as one big corporate enterprise, it is possible to see how the fictional personhood of European corporations —given autonomy by city-states and empires because that is what kept them dynamic— is quite different to the careful, interlocking coordination of Japanese society. The role of higher education in such a system apparently balanced the human life-course and wider society’s needs well. Studies by Japanese and foreign scholars alike (McVeigh, 2002) were keen to point out that universities often served to provide a kind of extended recreation between the intense pressures of schooling towards high-stakes examinations and what were once jobs for life, requiring exhausting dedication.

It is interesting that growing research on the progress of Japanese National Universities following corporatization often considers both the dimensions of responsiveness to the needs of a university’s local community and of its connectedness to global issues and conversations. For example, Murasawa, Watanabe and Hata’s 2014 study prompts university leaders to demonstrate an evolving pattern in which activities in science and technology are strengthening in terms of global networks, while the humanities and social sciences appear to be more focused on the roundedness of university communities and their roles in regional communities. Strategic national considerations may be taken for granted (given that most of the funding still comes from the national government), or perhaps considered something that institutional corporatization is aimed at lessening. Marginson and Rhoades’s *glonacal* heuristic could be usefully applied here; an important element of the corporatized Japanese National University remains the national interest, although how the relationship between Japan and its National Universities is evolving deserves to be evaluated in further studies. The element of “post-coronial” that pertains to the wider legitimacy of assessments applies to a large extent on whether the greater responsiveness of corporatized universities is understood in a flexible, enterprising and supportive way by the national authorities.

IV. Incorporating sustainability in the post-coronial university

To conclude, it is worth considering ways in which a corporatized National University might distinguish itself as an autonomous organization with multifaceted obligations to planet, country, region and communities which host and support it. The corporatization of Japanese National Universities has been roundly criticized over the years, treated as if it were a euphemism that claims to bestow greater autonomy, but appears to have yielded more market-oriented management through lowering resources (Yamamoto, 2004; Murasawa, Watanabe & Hata, 2014). In 2016, the Japanese legislature created a further status based on performance indicators and promising better resourcing for eligible National Universities: the *Designated National University Corporation* (指定国立大学法人). In keeping with the bodily theme, designated might more literally be rendered as *fixed with a finger*: the government and university both actors in the definition of institutionality. By the end of 2020, ten universities (including two in partnership) were subject to such governance structures. Initially, the criteria required recognition as being among the top ten National Universities in science, social impact and/or internationalization. As enjoying designated status confers positional advantage, it is increasingly difficult for further institutions to achieve those metrics, and the metrics may need restructuring or simply loosening.

Of course, autonomous universities are not obliged to imitate others in order to develop or to seek recognition, or to position themselves on the global stage. Okayama University has sought to distinguish itself through a partnership with the United Nations in pursuing sustainable development goals, building on the pioneering recognition of the surrounding region's designation as a Regional Center of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development. This is one example of how a corporatized university might draw on available resources from its location and wider stakeholders and establish distinctive forms of comparative advantage. Moreover, sustainability in particular brings together the themes of mutual survival that lie behind corporate identity. Japan's National Universities (unlike some of their private counterparts) may enjoy guaranteed immortality as part of the concept of corporatization, cheating death and any "coronial" assessment and living on beyond the horizons of human life-spans. Yet sustainability is a discourse that demands attention to how well they are performing with regard to their wider responsibilities to their members and to society. While that may sound poetic or even bizarre, it is an opportunity to understand corporatization as something other than market pressures. Whether we understand it as simply post-COVID-19, or as a kind of revival having undergone a coronial inquest, there is something about the term *post-coronial* university that invites a revision of how universities can contribute to a sustainable sense of community within a tumultuous world.

---

[1] While Japanese people often have difficulty with R and L, the Japanese approximation is also difficult for non-Japanese people. Hideo Kojima's [小島 秀夫] famous *Metal Gear* [メタルギア] video games feature an organization called らりるれろ, romanized as *La-Li-Lu-Le-Lo*, making fun of how Japanese children learn the alphabet while foreign adults have difficulty with this sound.

[2] With thanks to Valentina Goglio of *Università degli Studi di Torino* for alerting us to Eringfield's term, in Goglio's September 2021 presentation "Processes of Digitalization of HE in the USA and in Europe" for the online Public Policy Investigators forum.

[3] That is, in several instances a *madrassah* where higher education had long taken place adopted certain Western-inspired organizational features and became a university, called a *jamiea* in Arabic (literally, "assembly", just as *university* is derived from "turning into one" in Latin).

---

[4] One of the most constructive propositions is that of the Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen (2009), who repurposes the Japanese scholar of China Yoshimi Takeuchi’s [竹内好] term “Asia as method” to propose not only “de-colonization”, but “de-imperialization” and “de-Cold War” too.

References

Chen, K. H. (2010). *Asia as Method*. Duke University Press.

Eringfeld, S. (2021). Higher education and its post-coronial future: utopian hopes and dystopian fears at Cambridge University during Covid-19. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(1), 146-157.

Freeman, B., Teo, I., Leihy, P. & Kim, D. (2021) Rethinking higher education research focus and impact in an emergency. *Academic Letters* 10.20935/AL937

Ishinomori, S. (1988). *Japan, Inc.: Introduction to Japanese Economics (The Comic Book)*. University of California Press.

Kantorowicz, E. (1957). *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton University Press.

Kim, D. K., Leihy, P., Freeman, B. & Teo, I. (2021) National concepts and international students in Japan and Australia during Covid-19. 社会環境論究 (*Social and Environmental Studi*es).

Kim, D. K., Leihy, P., Freeman, B. & Teo, I. (2022). Higher education in emergency domains: an empirical framework. *Toyo University Asian Cultural Institute Annual Research Report 56*.

Leihy, P., Freeman, B., Teo, I. & Kim, D. K. (2021). The ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis on higher education systems and institutions: A study of industrialised and developing countries, in S. Gonçales & S. Majanovich (eds) *Pandemic, disruption and adjustment in higher education*, Brill

Marginson, S. & Rhoades, G. (2002). Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: A glonacal agency heuristic. *Higher education*, *43*(3), 281-309.

McNeely, I. F., with Wolverton, L. (2008). *Reinventing Knowledge: from Alexandria to the Internet*. WW Norton & Company.

McVeigh, B. (2014). *Japanese higher education as myth*. Sharpe.

Murasawa, M., Watanabe, S., & Hata, T. (2014). Self-image and missions of universities: An empirical analysis of Japanese university executives. *Humanities*, *3*(2), 210-231.

Readings, B. (1996). *The University in Ruins*. Harvard University Press.

Spanos, W. (1993). *The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Spanos, W. (1982). The End of Education: "The Harvard Core Curriculum Report" and the Pedagogy of Reformation. *Boundary 2*, 1-33.

Spanos, W. (2015). Posthumanism in the Age of Globalization: Rethinking the End of Education. *Symplokē*, *23*(1-2), 15-39.

Yamamoto, K. (2004). Corporatization of national universities in Japan: revolution for governance or rhetoric for downsizing?. *Financial Accountability & Management*, *20*(2), 153-181.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Penguin.