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The merger of departments across universities: The case of veterinary schools in Japanese national universities

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of neoliberalism, institutional mergers are often discussed and carried out in higher education. Among merger cases, this paper will focus on the departmental mergers across universities that have not been discussed. To discuss departmental mergers, the paper will pick up the case of the merger of departments of veterinary medicine in Japan. It will reveal many issues surrounding departmental mergers and veterinary medicine; universities' control of budgets and personnel, faculty members' academic interest, the switch to practical training because of changing social needs, professional associations' and local communities' influence as stakeholders, the stronger autonomy of the university than the power of the Ministry of Education (after 2001, the MEXT: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology), and international standards of veterinary medicine. The merger attempts led to joint undergraduate degree programs, in which two departments were combined but each remained in its original university. This partially addressed issues of size and clinical training. It can be called another type of merger. From the perspective of educational development, the case has many implications for the reorganization of the existing departments of veterinary medicine in Asia, most of which are smaller in size than their American counterparts. It is also significant to the departments of other disciplines, that are struggling to improve their standings because of their small size.

1. Introduction

As the higher education market shrinks, and the governmental budget for higher education is tightened, mergers among universities, and the restructuring of schools and colleges inside universities are under discussion in Japan. Mostly these discussions are driven by neoliberal thinking which emphasizes efficiency and market need in higher education from an economic point of views.

Among different types of mergers, this paper will focus on the departmental mergers across universities, that have not been studied. By using the case of departments of veterinary medicine in national universities in Japan, it will explore the possibilities of another type of merger: joint degree programs for the sake of excellence. By clarifying the difficulties surrounding mergers, the paper will provide many implications for the future departmental mergers in other countries and disciplines. The departmental mergers are initiated not by the MEXT nor the universities but by faculty members. Their attempts transcend the boundaries of universities. The stakeholders are influential and diverse. The fundamental change to the character of the discipline necessitated mergers: moving from academic training to professional training. The attempt is inspired by international standards.

The original attempt of the merger movement in the 1970s was to

merge several departments into one big school of veterinary medicine, but this was not successful because of the strong resistance from universities. Instead, a compromise was made in 2012 by establishing four joint undergraduate degree programs each between two universities. According to the typology of mergers, a joint degree program is classified as a form of merger.

The article consists of the following parts: concepts of mergers in universities, the history of veterinary education in Japan, issues surrounding veterinary medicine, the development of merger movement in 2012, and a comparison with other Asian countries. By analyzing the case of veterinary education in Japan, the article will discuss the influence of stakeholders surrounding higher education, the disciplinary tradition and changing social needs, and the difficulty of achieving mergers at a departmental level. It will suggest that the intervention of the MEXT into the movement was not direct, and that it prepared the conditions for joint degree programs by organizing committees and changing laws, which reflected neoliberal policies during the Koizumi Administration (2001–2006) which promoted the privatization of governmental bureaus such as the postal agency and the revision of temporary staff servicing laws under the banner of “structural reform.”

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2. Mergers, stakeholders, and neoliberal ideology

In 1994, [Martin et al. \(1994\)](#) pointed out that many universities and colleges in previous decades had considered university-level mergers in response to financial exigency but lacked a plan for “the mutual growth and enhancement of the missions ([Martin et al., 1994](#)).” They provided a typology of higher education mergers, which consists of pure mergers, consolidation, transfer of assets, consortium, federation, association, joint venture, and affiliation according to the level of financial and legal independence, and the scope of program coverage among participating institutions.

At the turn of the century when the consolidation and mergers of national universities were rigorously discussed in Japan, Takashi Hata pointed out that the arguments in favor of the merger were skewed toward the pursuit of efficiency and neglected the pursuit of excellence ([Hata, 2002](#)). In the same year, Kay Harman and V. Lynn Meek argued that the same phenomenon was prevalent in western countries ([Harman and Meek, 2002](#)). At this point, university-level mergers were often proposed by national governments “to address problems of institutional fragmentation, lack of financial and academic viability, and low efficiency and quality ([Harman and Harman, 2003](#)).”

Several years later, another type of merge emerged, aiming to increase the competitive advantage of institutions. Grant and Kay Harman called such mergers “strategic mergers” where “strong universities or colleges on their own initiative amalgamate with other strong institutions in order to enhance their competitive advantage ([Harman and Harman, 2008](#)).” For this type, Harman enlarged the Martin and Samels’ concept of mergers and included joint departments as in [Table 1](#).

Higher education is a complex system and carries many stakeholders. This is particularly conspicuous in professional training where the interests of industries and professional associations have a strong influence over curriculum and student numbers. According to Koichi Hashimoto, professional education is controlled by the three actors: the university, the government, and the consumer, and each actor are further divided by different stakeholders ([Hashimoto, 2009: 17–18](#)). In the case of veterinary education, the university is divided into schools and departments, the government is divided by different ministries, and the consumers are divided by professional organizations, alumni, and local communities/industries.

The changes that are taking place in higher education all over the world are often explained by the neoliberal ideology which values economic and political aspects of education. These changes tend to be characterized by commercialization, massification, and globalization, including the privatization of higher education institutions ([Lynch, 2006; Shin and Harman, 2009; Kandiko, 2010](#)). Camille B. Kandiko argues that the influence of neoliberal ideology is extensive and even promotes the stratification of disciplines, the rise of managerialism, the vocationalization of the curriculum, and consumerism among students. For the past twenty years, Japan has been swept by this ideology. Such arguments are relevant in interpreting the changes taking place in veterinary education.

3. History of veterinary education in national universities

The history of veterinary education in Japan is characterized by a

Table 1
Types of mergers.

Cooperation		Coordination		Mergers	
Informal collaboration	Affiliation	Consortium	Joint department	Mergers with federal structure	Mergers with unitary structure

lack of social recognition and resources. Since the mid-nineteenth century when modern universities were established, the discipline has been a branch of agricultural studies with small numbers of faculty members and students. There have been 10 departments of veterinary medicine in national universities in the period after World War II. All of them except Hokkaido and Tokyo belong to small local universities. Before the War doctoral programs had been established at the former Imperial Universities, Hokkaido University and the University of Tokyo.

The problem of the small size of departments of veterinary medicine was pointed out just after the War during the period of United States’ occupation. As early as 1947 the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) proposed standards of veterinary education, which required 72 faculty members for an incoming 60 students each year. C.T. Beechwood of the American occupation forces published a report on the conditions of veterinary education in Japan in 1948 which criticized the lack of faculty members, facilities, and clinical training ([Shinonaga, 1982: 188](#)).

Since then, several attempts have been made to upscale veterinary departments. According to Hideaki Karaki and Yasuhiro Yoshikawa, there have been three major phases of merger movements among national universities: Phase I from 1971 to 1990, Phase II from 1997 to 2004, and Phase III from 2008 to the present ([Karaki, 2005; Yoshikawa, 2009](#)).

During Phase I, the Science Council of Japan called for the extension of undergraduate veterinary education in 1971, which resulted in an increase in the length of undergraduate programs from four to six years in 1984. In 1974, the Ministry of Education introduced the Graduate School Establishment Standards which allowed small universities to jointly establish graduate programs. In 1990, four veterinary departments in the East and four departments in the West established joint doctoral programs.

During Phase II, the JUAA revised the standards of veterinary education in 1997 and once again called for an increase of faculty members and students. It added two more points. One was a recommendation for the differentiation of programs between basic research and clinical training, with the expectation that veterinary education should focus on the latter. This was a radical turn in the mission of veterinary education, shifting it from academic training to professional training. The second point was a reference to international standards, with the expectation that Japanese standards should be compatible with those in western countries. This reflected the growing internationalization of the veterinary profession. Combining both points, in 2001, the Science Council of Japan published a report that called for the establishment of new schools of veterinary medicine, which should meet international standards in size and quality, and train veterinarians who were competent in both practical and academic skills ([Science Council of Japan, 2001](#)).

During this phase, the publication of a survey of young veterinarians in 1998 by the Japan Veterinary Medical Association ([JVMA \(1998\)](#)) sent a shock wave to veterinary faculty members. In the survey, the young veterinarians who worked for animal hospitals expressed a strong dissatisfaction over their veterinary education, especially over the lack of clinical training. In 2001, [The JVMA \(2001\)](#) published a report on the future of veterinary education, calling for the re-organization of veterinary departments through mergers, and warned against local rivalries which had previously blocked mergers. In the same year, [Association of the Deans of the Schools of Agriculture \(2001\)](#) made a resolution to increase the number of faculty members among veterinary departments to 54. In 2004, [MEXT \(2004\)](#) organized a council to discuss veterinary education in national universities and set the minimum number of faculty members at 36.

Regardless of the establishment of joint doctoral programs, the improvement of undergraduate education through the merger was still an issue. The most likely scenario at this point was to merge eight veterinary departments into two and establish new schools of veterinary medicine at Kyushu University in the west and Tohoku University in the

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