

# How Momoyama Gakuin University Managed the COVID-19 Crisis During the Spring 2020 Semester<sup>1)</sup>

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## Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis throughout the world. Under the emergency, Momoyama Gakuin University (hereinafter referred to as “MGU”) had to manage to start the Spring 2020 semester with little time for preparation and no experience, just like many other educational institutions all over the world. Here I report how MGU managed the COVID-19 crisis during the Spring 2020 semester, from the standpoint of university executive committee<sup>2)</sup>. At the time of this writing, the pandemic is still far from over, and what they did then should be evaluated much later by a third party. For now, what I present here is just a record of what the university went through in the first six months of the pandemic.

## 1. An overview of COVID-19 pandemic in Japan

The COVID-19 pandemic was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The first confirmed outbreak in Japan was in January 2020 that occurred in the cruise ship Diamond Princess. This was followed by a wave of outbreak in February and March, leading to the temporary closure of all Japanese elementary, junior high, and high schools from late February until early April. At this point, universities were not included because they were in spring vacation during February and March. On April 7, the Japanese government proclaimed a one-month state of emergency for Tokyo, Osaka and other regions, which was extended to the whole country later. It lasted until mid-May (Figure 1).

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1) This paper is based on the manuscript prepared for a presentation at the Japan-Korea International Academic Seminar of Keimyung University and Momoyama Gakuin University on Nov. 17, 2020.

2) The author was a vice president and a member of the executive committee and of the Crisis Response Head office.

Keywords : COVID-19, pandemic, state of emergency, remote education

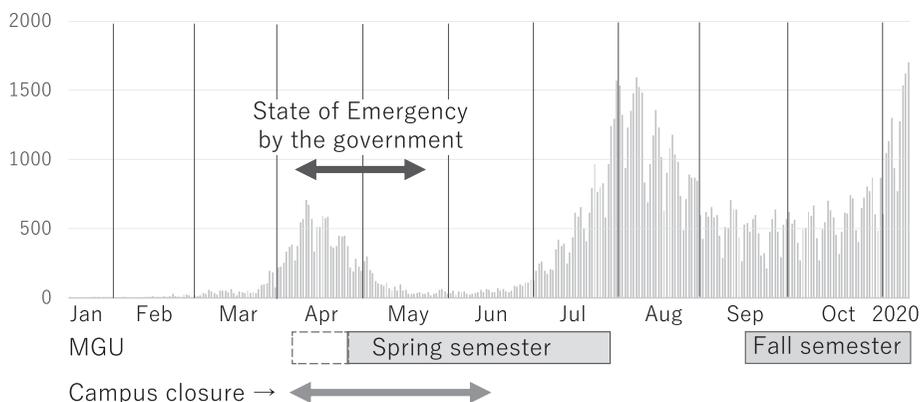


Fig. 1 : The number of COVID-19 positive cases in Japan, shown with government State of Emergency, MGU semesters and campus closure. The number of positive cases obtained from ref. 1.

## 2. Overview of responses at Momoyama Gakuin University

At MGU, the situation started in February 2020 when all the faculty members were requested to refrain from travelling to Wuhan, China. At this point, short programs such as study abroad in Cambodia and Vietnam were operated during the spring holidays as planned. We never knew what was coming.

The first alarming event was the abrupt returning of an MGU exchange student who was studying at Keimyung University in Daegu, Korea. Due to the outbreak in Daegu in February, we decided to terminate the program and let the student return immediately. As the rumors of danger in Daegu spread, and as the flights to Japan were cancelled one after another, we were kept in suspense until the student finally arrived in Japan two days later. We were all grateful of the extended support and help provided by the members of Keimyung University.

After this event, the situation worsened quickly. WHO announced COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11th. We simplified the commencement ceremony in March and cancelled the entrance ceremony for the class of 2020.

In Japan, an academic year begins in April. The classes for Spring 2020 had been planned to start on the 6th of April, but postponed to the 20th. The campus was closed. The government declared state of emergency. We tentatively decided that for the first two weeks the classes should be taught by providing class materials in PDF files via LMS (Learning Management System). We monitored the situation of the pandemic, hoping the virus would be gone away soon. By the time classes start, however, we announced that all classes should be taught online throughout the spring semester, until the end of July 2020. Later we also announced a cancellation of final examinations at the end of semester, not being able to ensure fairness in

remote environment. Students were evaluated by assignments and quizzes only.

These countermeasures were discussed and formulated by the Crisis Response Head office, established when the government announced the state of emergency in April, and led by the president Makino. The office has been responsible for any countermeasures related to COVID-19 at MGU.

The campus closure for students started in early April and lasted until late June. The first wave of pandemic receded in mid-May and the government lifted the state of emergency by the end of May. People started to go out. In-person classes restarted in elementary, junior-high, and high schools. But most universities maintained remote education until the end of July during the spring semester. Compared to primary or secondary schools, universities had been more or less able to shift their education online. Moreover, university students are coming from considerably wider areas, many of them spending hours on crowded trains so to risk their health if forced to commute to schools. Continued campus closure was a measure to ensure students health safety and to prevent transmissions of COVID-19 on campus. However, after the government lifted the state of emergency, there were mounting pressure and criticisms against university closure, because university students alone were not allowed to go to school and had to spend all day at home looking into computer monitors or smartphones. Although MGU lifted total closure in mid-May and partially permitted some use of campus facilities such as the library, the classes were kept taught online until the end of July and students were rare on campus until the fall semester began.

### **3. How classes were taught – the support for faculties and management of teaching**

On April 16, the Crisis Response Head office decided to have all the classes taught online during spring semester and asked all faculty members to adapt to remote education. We provided guidelines of remote education methods, namely distributing text materials in PDF files, recording audio or video lectures as on-demand materials, and broadcasting live synchronous classes via videotelephony software such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. We made manuals and how-to videos, organized workshops, and provided tips and information. In Facebook, an open group was formed for university faculties in Japan and other countries that discusses what-to-do's and how-to-do's for remote education. As of November 9, the group consisted of more than 21,000 members<sup>3)</sup>.

On the first day of remote classes, too many students accessed the LMS at the same time which caused temporary trouble. The system was reinforced immediately and the problem

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3) Ref. 2

was solved. Two weeks after the beginning of spring semester, we conducted a survey to all faculty members including temporary instructors asking for the troubles they were facing. Some were not familiar with the LMS. The LMS also needed to be tuned and upgraded by the maker. We provided Q-and-A's to solve the questions and difficulties as much as possible. Many classes were initially taught only by distributing PDF files. We asked to upgrade their teaching by including recorded videos as on-demand materials or by having a live session via Teams or Zoom. Many faculties devised creative and fruitful classes, but such effort was sometimes hampered by students' environment such as weak internet connections, old or lack of PCs, lack of proper environment at home and so on.

Whether classes were taught sufficiently in terms of remote education, we had to ask students in a survey. If serious complaints were made by students of particular classes, the Crisis Response Head office officially asked the lecturers to improve them. Such interventions to individual classes are usually rare at MGU as we value independence and autonomy of every faculty member. We at the head office restricted our request for improvement to how remote instructions were made online. No major objection was observed.

#### **4. How students learned – the support for students and the learning outcomes**

MGU decided to provide 50,000 Japanese Yen uniformly to all students, hoping to help them prepare for remote learning. We expanded the coverage of reduction or exemption of tuition. Payment period of tuition and fees was extended. We also started a loan program of laptop PCs and mobile Wi-Fi's for students who do not have the equipment. We tried to solve the difficulties students were facing based on students' voices in surveys. We conducted again a second survey to students in June asking about the classes they think there were problems. The Head office then requested the lecturers to make an improvement in response to the complaints. Using these surveys, we did our best to solve or mitigate students' complains and difficulties. However, some students and parents demanded partial refund of the tuition and fees.

The surveys revealed that students were overwhelmed by the series of assignments and reports of all the classes. In order to make sure students were participating in each class, the Crisis Response Head office asked the faculty members to assign some form of assignment, even just a small quiz or asking a comment, every time for all the classes. Some instructors, committed too much to make the remote class effective, might have asked too much assignment. The burden to students must be much heavier than usual, pre-coronavirus days.

We don't know for sure whether those assignments were effective for students' learning. But we know that the units earned and the grade distribution during the spring 2020 semester

showed that students earned more units at higher grade than previous years. The proportion of first-year students who earned more than 20 units was doubled in 2020 (Fig. 2a) and the GPA (grade point average) of first-year students was significantly higher than previous years (Fig. 2b).

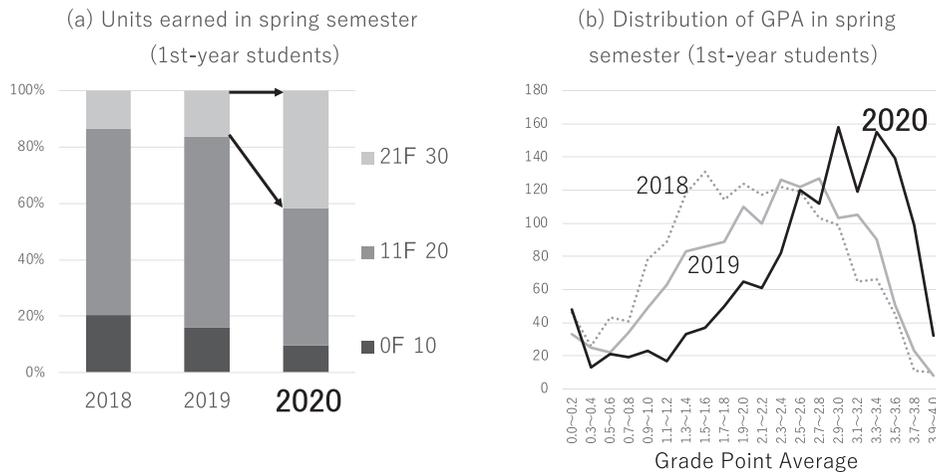


Fig. 2 : Students earned more units at higher grade in Spring 2020 than previous years.

(a) The number of units earned by first-year students in spring semesters in 2018, 2019 and 2020. (b) GPA distributions of first-year students in spring semesters in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Made from data printed on the grade reports for student guardians, provided by Kyomu-ka on Aug. 24, 2020.

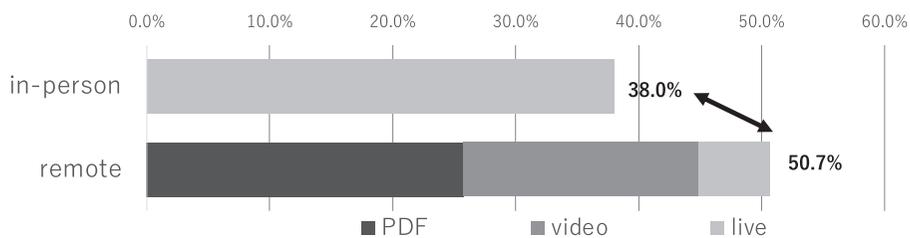


Fig. 3 : The number of students who answered remote education (3-types combined) was better for lecture classes exceeded those who favored in-person teaching. The question was “For lecture-type classes, which type of teaching is best suited for your learning, in-person, pdf files, on-demand videos, or live streaming?” Made from the final results of the 3rd student survey in spring 2020, conducted from July 09-15; 3309 out of 6171 (53.6%) students gave an answer. From a material for the information session on Aug. 03, 2020.

We cannot tell for sure whether this is a result of students studying harder or evaluation being lenient, as the final exams were cancelled as stated before. However, according to the third student survey we conducted in July, more students responded that remote learning was more effective in lecture-type classes than learning in a classroom (Fig. 3). Some wrote that remote learning can be personal in contact with the instructor, while in a classroom they would become one of many, anonymous persons. The experience gave us a new insight into the possibility and potential of remote education.

In October, we conducted a separate survey asking to students how much satisfaction they had in the teaching staff, in the curriculum, in the contents of the classes, and in overall university lives. Although the questions were vague and general, these are the key performance indices we use for five-year strategic plan of this university. The numbers we got were dismal: the proportion of students who answered satisfied was 15 to 20 % lower than previous years for all questions (Fig. 4). Students were dissatisfied. That seems contradictory to the previous survey about the learning experience in the spring semester. I presume that, although the remote-learning experience in the spring semester was not so bad for students, taking classes is just a part of their overall university lives and satisfaction in one or a few classes does not extend to the whole experience. Not being able to go to school, not having face-to-face interaction with friends and professors, overwhelmed by heavy burden of assignments, students were stressed, depressed, and looking for a chance to complain.

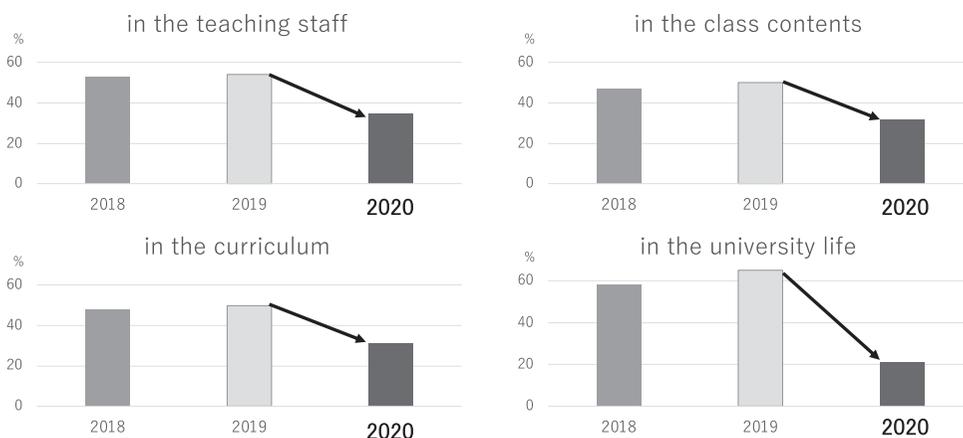


Fig. 4 : Proportions of students who answered “very much satisfied” or “satisfied” to the questionnaire asking their satisfaction in the teaching staff, in the class contents, in the curriculum, and in the overall university life. The choices were “very much satisfied”, “satisfied”, “can’t say which”, “dissatisfied”, and “very much dissatisfied”. For 2020, the survey was conducted from Oct. 12 till 18 ; 2273 out of 5986 students (38.0%) gave an answer.

## 5. Future prospects

As of November 15th 2020<sup>4)</sup>, we had only 9 cases found to be COVID-19 positive among some 6500 students, faculties and employees of MGU. The decision to close the campus and to have all classes online in the spring semester might have been actually effective in preventing transmission.

Fall 2020 semester started in late September maintaining most classes online, but small classes were held in-person on campus. Campus closure was lifted and students, although fewer than usual, were roaming in campus. However, the third wave of pandemic was sweeping across Japan (Fig. 1). Some students and faculty members were afraid of commuting to school. Even in-person classes had to be given in a flexible manner, allowing remote access from home.

We, the faculty members, have learned the potential of remote education, which might be applied to solve some long-standing issues in the university, such as massive classes that do not fit in one classroom, and multiple classes, of supposedly the same content but not really so, taught by different instructors. The new technologies and the on-demand class materials the faculty produced this spring may also be used to teach more effectively even in in-person classes. How we accommodate this experience to the core of the education practice is a key for all the universities that prosper in the next decade. The “new normal” of university education will not be the same as that before corona<sup>5)</sup>.

## References

- (1) Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare webpage: COVID-19 cases in Japan  
[https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/pcr\\_positive\\_daily.csv](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/pcr_positive_daily.csv) (accessed Nov. 15, 2020)
- (2) Facebook open group “A group to share wisdom and information about what university faculties should do and would do under the new coronavirus impact”  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/146940180042907> (accessed Nov. 09, 2020)

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4) Two days before this paper was presented at the seminar.

5) The author is grateful to Prof. Kojima, the chief of Research Institute of Momoyama Gakuin University, for giving the opportunity to present this paper at the International Seminar. This paper was made possible with the help of the executive committee members.

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IWAO Keisuke

### **Abstract**

The pandemic of COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis throughout the world. Under the emergency, Momoyama Gakuin University had to manage to start the Spring 2020 semester with little time for preparation and no experience, just like many other educational institutions all over the world. The situation changed day by day, the internet infrastructure was not adequate for remote education, and new demands put too much burden on some faculty members. Under the difficulties, the University executive committee made every effort to maintain study opportunities for the students.