Japanese universities: Change or risk marginalization

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Following 20 years teaching at a Japanese university, I found myself working at an overseas institution where the level of academic rigor, and staff and student assessment are remarkably higher, and the decision-making significantly more efficient. By contrasting my former Japanese university with the institution where I am presently employed, I conclude that Japanese universities need to take radical steps to reform and upgrade in order to stay competitive in a very competitive global environment.

筆者は日本の大学で20年間教鞭を取った後に、ある外国の教育機関で教えることになった。そこでは学問の厳格さのレベルも教職員や学生の評価も著しく高く、決定事項も非常に効率良く処理されている。私が勤務していた日本の大学と、現在勤務している教育機関を比較し、日本の大学はもっと徹底的な方法で改革を行い、レベルを上げていかないと、この競争の厳しいグローバルな教育環境では競争力を維持できなくなるという結論に至った。

Change comes in many forms, both big and small. In my case, a career move made two years ago was of the former kind, not just changing schools, but also countries. Such an occasion brings forth a natural tendency to compare and judge whether the decision to move was the right one. Making judgments on the basis of one comparison, however, has clear limitations. When contrasting two universities in terms of quality, academic rigor and a myriad of other elements, it is difficult to account for the many local nuances such as the perceived level of the respective institutions, their population body, the underlying purpose of tertiary education within the society, and so on.

This caveat bears considering as I proceed to describe my move overseas after spending 20 years at a Japanese national university, the last six with the title, *Professor*. Any generalities derived from my observations here are colored by both the peculiarities of where I spent an uninterrupted two decades as well as the unique set of conditions that I now find myself in. Nevertheless, the contrast, especially with regard to matters such as academic rigor, assessment, and decision making are so vast, I feel it is worthwhile to mention a few, not only for personal reference and deliberation, but also for posterity's sake. Accordingly, below I look at several areas where the contrast between my new and old institutions is stark.

Job performance

Let me begin by discussing a broad, but essential issue in any working environment: performance assessment. In my later years in Japan, I had noticed a movement towards a need for accountability. For example, starting four years ago all tenured staff was required to submit their academic activities such as publications, conference presentations, successful grant applications, and community service, on an annual basis. Before this, a system was in place to record one's performance, but it was not enforced. Upon my departure, although it was mandatory to submit one's academic activities, there were no stated requirements, expectations, performance reviews or even suggested minimum standards. Because of this, whether one's performance was praiseworthy (i.e., replete with international publications and successful grant proposals), or completely inactive, the result was the same. In other words, the annual exercise was a ceremony, with no reward or penalty for superior or inferior performance.

This lack of accountability extended to promotion decisions as well. Although a point system existed for committees to assess a candidate's performance, the bar was set ludicrously low except for one criterion. Points were gathered for publications, committee work, grants, and community service, but with unrefereed papers accumulating almost as many points as refereed ones, a candidate could simply write a paper and submit it to the department journal once every few years (where it would be edited for typos and margin specifications) and reach the minimum point level. That one exceptionally difficult criterion mentioned above, of course, was age. Unwritten understandings made it clear that teaching staff under a certain age could not be considered for promotion no matter how many points they had accumulated.

Contrast this system with the one where I work now. Performance reviews occur every two to three years with clear benchmarks. One of these is a minimum of one internationally refereed publication each year. Academic staff is expected to publish in highly ranked journals based on established standards. Student evaluations of teachers for each class taught are gathered and tallied generating an overall magic number representing one's teaching performance. Again, a low score makes promotion quite difficult and can even jeopardize contract renewal. The other main criteria are successful external grant applications and community service, such as organizing conferences, acting as editorial board members, and reviewing. Noteworthy among the criteria that have little bearing are conference presentations, publishing in conference proceedings, and authoring course books. At contract renewal time, substandard performance can, and does result in non-renewal, while strong activity and scores result in promotion. As for age, since promotion is based on merit, promising young scholars are promoted based on their academic activities. And when they are not, they are sometimes poached by another university.

Student evaluations

For the past ten years or so my Japanese university would distribute 50 course evaluation forms to all teachers at the beginning of each semester. The form consisted of one sheet of paper with Likert-style items producing a numerical score which was tabulated manually. Students also had space to make comments. Teachers were instructed to choose one class at the end of the semester and have students fill out the forms and return them to the office. I did this at the end of each semester, and several months afterwards I received a score with a ranking comparing me with other teachers. However, because my score represented only about 20% of the students that I taught, and because I sometimes gave the survey to my favorite class, while other times I gave it to a *tough* class, I was unsure what the score really revealed. I was also unsure to what extent other teachers picked and chose which class to do the evaluation; therefore, although I did receive a ranking, it was close to meaningless. More disturbing was the fact that, after receiving my score, no follow-up ever occurred. Essentially, whether I ranked first or last resulted in neither reward nor penalty. Again, the exercise was a ceremony.

In contrast, where I now work course evaluation forms are distributed to every student in every course. The resulting scores are tabulated, generating a grand average which is used during regularly scheduled performance reviews. In other words, students have real power to either reward or penalize depending on the quality of teaching. In effect, teachers care about their scores, and prepare their lessons, teach their classes and assess their students accordingly. Certainly, much has been written casting doubt upon the effectiveness of students' evaluation of university courses (Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006; Wilson, 1998). Indeed, a numerical score for something as qualitative as teaching performance raises concern. The point here, however, is not to judge the effectiveness of student evaluations, but to reflect on how they are carried out and used. In other words, in my present context, unlike my former one, all students are given a voice and the results of their opinions can and do have an impact on teaching performance.

Grading

During my 20 years in Japan, the distribution of grades among students was a frequent topic of discussion in meetings. Often, although guidelines existed for how As, Bs, Cs, and Fs should be allocated, some teachers had reputations for being either excessively severe or generous. On occasion, I was told that my grades were too low and I filled in a form explaining why, and that was the end of the exercise.

In my present job, grades are subject to internal monitoring and external review. In other words, a small number of student assignments in each course must be passed on to other colleagues who will moderate them without knowing the original grade assigned by the course teacher. Naturally, the moderator is one who is familiar with the course material and grading criteria. When discrepancies occur, the assignment has to be re-graded. During quality assurance exercises, the same process is carried out by external examiners. Such a system tends to provide assurance that teachers who assign grades outside a set norm will be prevented from doing so, thus giving confidence to students that the grades they receive are fair.

Decision-making

In universities, as in other large organizations, decisions are normally made by groups of people meeting together. Although many people do not enjoy meetings, they are viewed as a necessary evil. In my Japanese university, I attended meetings at the graduate school level, faculty level, and department level each at least once monthly. These meetings ran from about two to four hours roughly divided between announcements and discussion sections. While there was often some fruitful discussion, much of the time was taken up by sub-committees announcing their recent activities, most of which did not concern me. As an example, on numerous occasions in faculty meetings I was forced to listen as someone from another department stood up and read a prepared text describing the resume of a new hiree in detail. This took around 25 minutes each time. In addition, I expended a considerable amount of time in committee meetings. Often, these were rewarding as our group members worked towards a common goal which we were proud of. At other times, however, no clear goal was apparent and after a year or two, the committee chair stopped calling meetings and the obscure goal faded. I believe it is not an exaggeration to say that in the course of a year, several days' worth of time was taken up sitting through meeting items that either did not concern me or lacked concrete outcomes.

In my new job, while there are also many meetings, they are generally limited to two hours with most ending short of this. Agenda items tend to be limited to areas which concern me, and when it appears that there is insufficient reason for holding a regularly scheduled meeting, it is cancelled. Committee meetings have concrete goals, although they are not necessarily ones that I would choose. As a result of these differences in the style of decision-making, I would estimate that the time I spend in meetings now is roughly half of what I spent in Japan.

Funding

Academic staff at universities generally has funding available to them for research purposes. In my own case, each year in Japan I automatically received about ¥500,000 in *kenkyuuhi* (research budget) that was not tied to any particular grant application. Naturally, I welcomed this money, and often spent it either on travel to conferences, books, or computer equipment and software. However, over the years, I had noticed that some of my colleagues were more creative in the use of this money spending it on travel and goods that were marginally connected to research without being questioned. Coffee makers, cameras, and *Lonely Planet* guidebooks for future recreational travel are just three items I recall. With some reluctance, I have to admit that in some cases my own purchases crossed into this *creative* category as well.

In my final year in Japan, some accountability began to appear in the system. Our faculty started deducting ¥200,000 from the research funds of those who did not apply for the *kaken* research grant. Notably, however, whether one's grant application was successful or not had no bearing. Simply submitting an application was good enough to avoid the deduction. At the time, one colleague who recognized the flaw in such a penalty, commented to me using a baseball analogy, "this system is like assessing your *at bats* rather than your hitting percentage."

In my present job, similar amounts of money are available, but restrictions are much tighter. For the money that arrives automatically on an annual basis, travel to conferences and the hiring of research assistants are the two most common usages. However, if one travels to a conference, one must have been accepted as a presenter, and there is an expectation that some research output will result. Acceptable outputs include refereed journal papers or book chapters; conference proceedings are not counted. If those outputs do not appear, future travel will not be supported. As for grant applications, while they are not mandatory, there is a tacit understanding that research usually proceeds more smoothly with the help of research assistants, and the easiest way to employ them is to use funding from successful grant applications. At contract renewal and promotion time, research output is one of the key pieces of evidence used to decide whether academic staff are kept on or promoted. Thus, funding from competitive grant applications factors very highly in one's overall assessment. Additionally, when grant money is mostly directed towards salaries for research assistants, young members of the academic community are encouraged to participate in projects which helps to nurture a new generation of scholars.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the experiences that I describe here cannot necessarily be generalized to all universities in Japan or my present locale. Indeed, my whole working experience in Japan was in a faculty whose focus was foreign language teaching. Other faculties may have different ways of doing things. However, anecdotal discussions with other teachers suggest to me that the various regulations and customs I describe above are not atypical of what goes on in each place. I would also suggest that with regard to higher education among developed countries, it is Japan which is the outlier when it comes to issues such as academic accountability, the power of students' voices and the extent of the bureaucracy that I have discussed above. Such a statement is certainly not new (see McVeigh, 1998; 2002; Van Wolferen, 1989). However, my aim in contrasting my experiences at a Japanese university with my present one is to point out the need for a movement in Japanese higher education towards a system that provides better accountability, rigor, and efficiency. As globalization heats up the competition to draw students from nearby regions and around the world, one of the main attractions that a university can offer is the quality of its educational experience. Students are drawn to places where they can receive the highest quality education possible within their budget. At the moment, the educational experience offered by Japanese universities is not as good as it could be. Moribund practices in Japan such as those that I have described above contribute towards the prevailing mediocrity and the failure to take the fullest advantage of the talent that exists in Japanese universities. This is especially the case for young Japanese scholars who have been exposed to more rigorous approaches to academia while abroad only to return home to be driven down like nails by a system more focused on hierarchy and procedure than merit and efficiency. The current sharp decline of Japanese studying abroad (coupled with the simultaneous rise of students from other Asian countries studying overseas) may be just one more indicator of this concern (Editorial, Dec. 27, 2010).

Further evidence of a decline in Japanese higher education has emerged recently. The Japanese government has announced a goal of having 300,000 foreign students by the year 2020 (Higher Education Bureau, n.d.). However, this figure appears unrealistic considering that only 142,000 foreign students were studying in Japan in 2010, increasing only 25,000 from six years earlier. Additionally, the true global reach of this number is minimal with 92% of students coming from Asian countries (JASSO, n.d.). In a similar vein, only two Japanese universities were ranked in the top 100 universities in the world in 2010 (Times Higher Education, 2010) compared to four a year earlier. By comparison, Hong Kong, with a population of about only five percent of Japan's has three.

While many of the problem areas I have outlined above, such as the lengthy consensus-oriented decision-making process and the hierarchical organizational structure, are steeped in Japanese culture, this status quo can no longer effectively compete against the more efficient, rigorous, and aggressive systems set in place at universities in many developed countries. Without rapid moves to bring far-reaching reforms to Japanese higher education, the goal mentioned above will be reached neither in terms of quantity or quality. Like my recent big transition, radical change is needed in Japanese universities in order to compete in the global marketplace for students; the alternative is marginalization.

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