

A Tale of Two Japanese Universities: changing culture.

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Eleven years of working in the Japanese tertiary education system involved me in culture change. Most of that, surprisingly perhaps, change that had little to do with the conventional image of Japanese society. Some of the experience seems highly connected to cultural change needed in New Zealand business today.

The Background

Education was a key resource in the rise of the Japanese economy in the second half of the 20th Century. Historically, for Japanese workers the divide between those with a tertiary qualification and those without has been marked. Permanent ‘whole of life’ employment, significantly better remuneration and working conditions, access to pension schemes, housing loans and other forms of social status and security have been the traditional rewards of graduation from university in Japan. Those with secondary education only were more often restricted to casualised employment and subsequently rental accommodation and other symbols of lesser economic security and social status.

The Boom

The drive for places in universities led to an acutely competitive entrance exam system known as ‘exam hell.’¹ Students from all social classes strove for a limited number of places in what are overwhelmingly private institutions. In the 70’s and 80’s universities boomed along with the rest of the Japanese economy. Famous institutions like the national university Chuo University in Tokyo built huge campuses in out-lying regions of the city. Today there are 400-odd universities in Japan, about 100 in Tokyo alone.

Social and economic pressures meant that almost half of Japan’s high school leavers got places in fulltime tertiary courses by the late 1990’s.

The Bust

With the lowest birth rate in the world and a declining youth population the educational boot is now on the other foot. There are now enough places for anyone wanting to enter a university to get there without trying. And there are huge pressures on tertiary provider’s budgets to fill seats. Exam-hell still rules high school lives, but the race now is for high-status universities only.

Competition drives change. A shift to a service economy and a demand for lower wage costs to compete internationally is rapidly changing Japan’s business culture. Whole-of-life employment is increasingly a thing of the past and

¹ *Japanese Education and Literacy*

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casualised employment for Japanese university graduates is becoming the norm. The status of a university qualification now needs to be tagged with the name of the right university to have real economic or social clout.

Sourcing clients from lower income families has also impacted on universities. Diminished family resources means students need part-time jobs to complete their education. Universities like Chuo University that sold downtown Tokyo resources in the real-estate boom of the 80's are now shifting campuses and courses back to central city areas. One university I worked at, Oberlin University, traditionally had its campus 40 kilometres from the central business district of Tokyo. Early in this century Oberlin built a new graduate school in the heart of Shinjuku – a few steps from Tokyo's (and the world's) busiest railway station.

Dealing with change

Toyo University, where I worked for three years, has built a new high-rise central city campus in Bunkyo-ku. They have effectively closed down two large campuses in out-lying areas of Tokyo. Facilities for some 12,000 students were relocated. The re-built high-density campus is close to entertainment centres, part-time jobs and reduces travel time for student clients.

Like most other universities in Japan, corporately owned Toyo University closed down its two-year junior college facilities in the late 90's and integrated staff and programmes into re-shaped four-year university faculties. The old junior college campus site in central city Bunkyo-ku is now part of the re-built/consolidated four-year university campus.

Whatever changes took place valued staff were prioritised. Redundancies never happened at Toyo. The faculty members from the closed junior college were integrated into the four-year college in new roles with new goals. Up-skilling was encouraged and supported. Of course the change was not painless but everyone accepted it needed to happen.

Programmes changed too. I was involved with setting up a new school of English Communications in the Faculty of Literature. The focus was away from classical generalist and literary education. The market for technical and business courses that had been partly the domain of junior colleges was absorbed into the new four-year curriculum. All of that meant faculty members with long years of investment in more traditional literature classes and cultures were asked to change their identity.

Not an easy call for academics with proud lists of publications in a particular niche of learning. Some went along grudgingly. A few relished the opportunity. All needed to feel engaged in the re-newel process. High levels of tolerance and respect were needed all round. For people like myself committed to change, it meant long hours over time, listening to individuals' ideas and criticisms and then engaging these with the programme where practical. Sometimes that meant commitment to things I didn't feel comfortable with myself. Practice usually sorted out good ideas from less productive ones. My own included.

Productivity was also profiled. I taught under-graduate debating classes for 60 students. The classes were in English – a second language for these learners. And no, with a student-based syllabus that is not the overwhelming mission it might seem. The approach meant that faculty members were then available for more intensive one-to-one relationships with students in tutorials and specialist classes at higher levels. Responsibility for learning was also partly devolved onto learners themselves. Study groups and tutorials were set up to assist students into becoming more independent learners. This is a big change from traditional top-down education practice in Japan.

Kanto Gakuin University where I worked for five years was also engaged with this same process. The junior college there was closed in 2002 and the affected faculty members mainly re-allocated to the Faculty of Human and Environmental Studies that I joined that same year. This new faculty developed a revitalised curriculum again focusing on what was currently perceived as marketable: computer graphics, language programmes that built on Internet resources, courses for early childhood education workers and aged-care workers and so on. All relevant to the new Japan of the 21st Century.

Today the Faculty of Human and Environmental Studies remains Kanto Gakuin's top recruiting faculty. But that statement needs to be put in perspective. The traditionally strong faculties of Engineering, Economics and Literature at Kanto Gakuin simply don't have enough students to survive the next few years. Any strategy likely to turn this situation around seems far away. Commitment to the *status quo* has some suggesting the university's days are numbered.

At Kanto Gakuin location away from the central area of metropolitan Tokyo is a big disadvantage. Despite a plethora of new buildings the campus is nowhere near students' part-time jobs. Academics and administrative staff have been made to pay for the re-construction programme in reduced wages and working conditions. The atmosphere on campus borders on morbid some days. Small scandals such as a recent media expose of student use of marihuana in the rugby club send tectonic waves through a now fragile community.

Importantly at Kanto Gakuin good programme ideas didn't always the strategic planning contexts that would enable them to be successful. As at Toyo University support systems to encourage independent learning were put in place. But these were not connected to other courses or classes in the way they had been at Toyo. At Kanto Gakuin I spent two hours a week for four semesters waiting for students who might come for additional language or more general study skills support. But no strategy directed them from classes where they were in need to the study resource centre. I saw half a dozen people in those four semesters.

At both Kanto Gakuin and Toyo Universities I was involved in the processes of change. Both were exciting if challenging situations to be in. Neither was entirely successful nor a complete failure. The things that lead to constructive development were to be found in both cases, one more so than the other.

At both universities major amounts of money were spent on re-vitalising the physical appearance of campuses. Japan, after all, is the wrapping society². Both re-developed at least parts of their curriculum to meet changing markets. No doubt the physical consolidation of Toyo University to its centralised campus made it more attractive to student clients.

Most importantly in my experience, at Toyo University there was a willingness to value the intangibles that add value to business. Valuing people and acknowledging the need for culture changes that engaged faculty members was key there. At Kanto Gakuin there were successes too, again based on valuing people.

In the Modern Communications School at Kanto Gakuin university we developed a nascent but significant culture of teamwork around action-research³. Full-time faculty members, part-time lecturers and students got engaged in trying to solve common learning problems through cooperative effort. Central to this was a focus on blended learning using a mix of in-class work with on-line research and publication. The open-source software *Moodle* was the basis of this part of our curriculum and it forced a constructivist approach to learning. Learning became the unifier and equaliser among both students and faculty members. In many cases the students knew more about using technology than the faculty. Building the community learning resource on-line became the responsibility and an opportunity for any and all in the department. Change was about learning. Learning was about change. Teachers made joint presentations on their part in the process to conferences in Japan and other countries. Students made presentations and wrote thesis on their experiences.

Open questions about what students found rewarding and helpful in the processes were valued and published. Successes and failures in the classroom became research topics in themselves. Mixes of blogs, on-line peer and teacher feedback, hard copy and Internet magazine publications drove communication classes. The culture of questioning became acknowledged as part of the culture of learning in a practical sense.

It wasn't all 'fun.' Some students and some faculty members found it tough to have to answer to their stakeholders. One teacher went to the university council complaining of attempts to destroy the curriculum and undermine teacher authority. Students who didn't like the approach changed courses or dropped out. Yet today the Modern Communications School is the only school at Kanto Gakuin that meets student recruiting targets.

In both Toyo and Kanto Gakuin Universities the leading people acknowledged a need for change. Only at one did they recognise that they themselves were part of a culture that needed re-development. To paraphrase Tolstoy, we are often willing to encourage change but rarely are we willing to acknowledge our own

² Joy Hendry (1995) *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies* (Oxford Studies in the Anthropology of Cultural Forms) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Davydd J. Greenwood; Morten Levin, (1998) *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE

part in the impediment to renewal.⁴ At Toyo robust debate saw three different chancellors in the short time I was there. The election of a woman as chancellor –even if only for a short time - suggested an openness to difference. At Kanto Gakuin the same kindly gentleman has been in power for decades. His eighty plus years reflect well the traditions of respect for hierarchy in traditional Japan.

In the breakup of the two-year junior college and construction of the new Faculty of Human and Environmental Studies at Kanto Gakuin, three new schools presented themselves fairly logically. These were in education, design and health. The rump of courses and staff were aggregated to the School of Modern Communications. Some of us called our school the faculty compost heap. The mix of disciplines represented in the school was eclectic to say the least and fractious to a point of despair some days. Added to that was a larger than 'usual' mix of cultures. The predominantly non-native Japanese language teachers came from Socratic backgrounds while native Japanese computer specialists were from the Confucian traditions. The potential for misunderstanding was explosive. Some days no amount of talk bridged the gaps in experiences. Only reflective teamwork resolved issues. But when it did the outcomes were also explosive. Lessons learned by students in computer animation classes were applied to English language projects – often led by the students rather than the faculty. The cultures cross-pollinated by joint commitment to the clients. Newspapers prepared by language students became the basis of a parallel development in Japanese business courses. One group spring boarding off its interaction with another. In short – as Japanese learners of English are fond of saying- the mix of cultures that was potentially a problem some days became an unbeatable resource.

Successful programmes are not always valued – at least when they have to compete with strong vested interest. By 2007 the energy for innovation in the School of Modern Communications had dissipated somewhat and good faculty members had moved on. In part a lack of understanding of what had been happening there by leaders of the university meant the extra resources that change requires were not available. They found it easier to deal with bricks and mortar.

Ownership of Change

So what did I learn from these experiences? At Toyo University the understanding of investment in people – especially staff - seemed qualitatively different. That reflected across the organisation in a commitment to change that engaged everyone. A strategic plan for change is needed if the commitment of people is to produce real results. Some great local changes at Kanto Gakuin could have lifted the whole organisation with clearer leadership from the top. Where support is indifferent good people move on to other places. But even with less than effective direction people enjoy change that they have ownership of. Especially where taking risks is a valued and an acknowledged part of the

⁴ "I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all possible means -- except by getting off his back."
- Leo Tolstoy

process. The culture of change is about giving up part of what we value and we only do that if the risks are worthwhile.