Creating Powerful, International Learning Environments in Higher Education: A Case Study of an English-Language University Department in Japan

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Abstract

This paper discusses the complexity of developing a powerful international learning environment. As a case study, it examines an "American-style" English-language university department in Japan and the challenges it faces from demographics and internationalization. It analyzes the institution at a local level by identifying issues related to social capital and social equity, and at a broader national cultural level, using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to identify contrasting elements between American and Japanese approaches to higher education. Finally, it offers suggestions that may help increase: the appeal of the university; its ability to develop strong relationships with stakeholders; and ultimately, its chances of long-term success.

Keywords: higher education, internationalization, social capital, Hofstede

Introduction

What constitutes a powerful, international learning environment in higher education? This is a complicated question. It is not just enough to bring intelligent people together in one organization. Indeed, intelligent people can quickly find themselves wasting their intelligence and energy on institutionalized activities such as pointless meetings and burdensome paperwork (Spicer, 2016). There is not a single answer, rather, there are many possible variations depending on such factors as the needs of the stakeholders, the mission and objectives of the school, the physical structure of the learning space, the internal cultural orientation of the school, the national cultural context, the various cultures involved, and how these factors interact.

Added to this complexity, the very concept of what a university is has been changing with a shift from academic learning for its own sake to a more skills-oriented approach to education (Barnett, 2004). Barnett (2011, p. 444) calls this new model of higher education "academic capitalism", that is, an education system shaped to meet economic needs. Altbach (2015) is quite vocal in his opposition to this shift. He argues against newcomer universities, particularly specialized, for-profit ones that he labels "pseudo universities". He views these market-driven schools as a threat to the university's contribution to society by neglecting the traditional roles of offering a broad education and advancing the state of knowledge through research (Altbach, 2015).

In light of these challenges, variations, and changes, how can we frame what constitutes a powerful, international learning environment? Srikanthan and Dalyrymple (2007) provide a starting point with their holistic model; they see the development of a quality education culture existing on a polar scale between managerialism and cloisterism. A well-balanced university neither gives full control to its managers or its academics. Tapscott and Williams (2010) argue that universities need to adopt a collaborative approach to learning, particularly now that society is more interconnected due to

the Internet. Academics need to find a way to move past their protective cloisters and engage with greater society or risk accusations of succumbing to the ivory tower syndrome. This is challenging as the hierarchical power structure of traditional universities and their departmentalization can create roadblocks to progressive change and collaboration (Altbach, 1973). Similarly, universities need to avoid an overly managerial approach that can create excessive bureaucracy, stifle academic freedom, and shift the focus of the institution away from learning to more business-oriented needs.

Rather than placing the needs of the economy at the center of education, Barnett (2011) promotes the idea of the "ecological university" with an emphasis on the university's connections to the wider society. This is a useful model as it recognizes the complexity of the university's role and allows for discussion of social capital in relation to higher education. This paper explores social capital's importance in creating a vibrant learning environment that reaches across national boundaries, and the effect national cultural differences can have on that environment.

Social Capital

Understanding what "social capital" is can be difficult because the way the term uses the word "capital" is really an imperfect analogy with the way the word is used in the sense of physical capital. For example, physical capital is durable, while social capital is ongoing and needs to be maintained. Further complicating the matter, the phrase "spending social capital" has become common in everyday speech, with the sense that it is finite. This usage views social capital as calling on favors that are owed.

Bryman (2015, p. 21) provides a useful academic definition of social capital: it is the social connections the people are able to draw upon when pursuing a goal. Putnam (1995, p. 66) goes a step further and defines it as the aspects of social organization, including social trust and civic engagement, which "facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." This inclusion of "mutual benefit" would suggest that social capital is more than accrued favors. In this sense, social capital is a support network.

Brennan and Naidoo's (2008) work on social justice in higher education suggests a strong connection between social equity and social capital. They explain that social justice is about finding ways of building a more equitable society for all members (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 287). For higher education institutions this means not only exporting its knowledge to its community, but also being open to the import of ideas and values of the community. Universities can help shape society by both its external activities and by the way it transforms itself internally to be respectful and equitable (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 288).

Institutional Background

Perhaps the best way to understand the relationship between powerful learning and social capital in international higher education is through a case study. One of my previous institutions, a newly-opened international department at an established private university in Japan, provides such an opportunity. I was involved with the department's accreditation process in the year preceding its opening and worked at the school for one year as a lecturer. The following description and analysis is based on my experience during that time period. As limitations of this study, I recognize that different stakeholders will have viewed circumstances from other perspectives that may not necessarily be

represented here, and that the institution will have changed since that time. Furthermore, the paper excludes discussion of any institutional documents or statistics not available in the public domain.

The International Department (a pseudonym) offers a four-year bachelor's degree program, almost completely in English and with the requirement that all students spend one year abroad at a partner university. In its first year, the full-time faculty was composed of approximately 20 people with 50% coming from the United States; about 10% each from Japan, the UK, Canada, and Germany; and 10% from others. The department's parent school, University A, is renowned throughout the country for its athletics programs. Despite the International Department's promotion of itself as a rigorous academic institution, as a new school, its reputation amongst potential students in Japan was still closely tied to the parent, which was not particularly known for its academics.

University A opened the International Department amidst a very challenging demographic context in Japan. The country experienced a period of strong economic growth as it rebuilt itself following the end of World War 2, with its economy peaking in the early 1990s. During the boom period, students competed for places in university, however the tables have turned with universities now competing for a smaller pool of 18 year-olds (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research-Japan, n.d.). Larger centers such as Tokyo and Osaka continue to draw young people, but the effects of the nation's population decline are clearly felt in smaller centers such as the one in which University A is located.

In my time at the International Department, the department was treated as a semi-autonomous college by University A and differed significantly from the parent. For example, the department set many of its own rules; faculty were employed on a contract basis compared to the tenure track at University A; faculty were exempt from regular university-wide faculty meetings; the department followed a different annual calendar than the parent university in order to allow for a fall intake of international students and to include an extra winter semester for an intensive English language course; International Department students could not take courses within other University A departments and vice versa; and the International Department students did not take part in most University A clubs or campus events.

The model for the International Department was significantly influenced by another internationally-focused university in Japan, which grew out of a failed branch campus of an American university. Indeed, the International Department's founding dean and approximately one third of the International Department's faculty had previously worked at University B. As with University B, the International Department aimed to provide an American-style college education, completely in English, with a mandatory one-year study abroad component. In order to facilitate the study abroad component, the International Department established reciprocal student exchange agreements with numerous universities abroad with mutual tuition fee waivers.

Social Equity at the International Department

In their commitment to the advancement of universal knowledge, universities are, by their very nature, internationally-oriented institutions (Kerr, 1991). As the name suggests, the International Department was particularly internationally-focused and it was able to build an impressive and extensive network around the world through its international exchange partners.

The International Department promoted itself with two foci for two audiences. For the international students (i.e. non-Japanese), the school promoted itself as a place to learn about

traditional and pop Japanese culture while earning an American-style education. For Japanese students, the school promoted itself as a place that prepared students for careers using English on a global stage. In both instances, the department's version of internationalization was closely related to America. This was reinforced by the fact that half of the faculty came from the United States.

More and more higher education institutions have been making conscious efforts to make themselves more socially representative (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Ironically though, the philosophy of the International Department, in its equation of internationalization with quality and America, drove the school away from being representative of local society. It could be said that the school did not represent its local population by design. Indeed, the high percentage of "non-Japanese" faculty was used as a selling point, and, upon opening, the only Japanese faculty member was employed as the Japanese language teacher. Unfortunately, hiring faculty based on the assumption that their foreignness makes them more qualified than Japanese could be considered discriminatory. Holliday (2006) refers to this belief that native English speakers represent ideal representatives of Western culture and values from whom others can learn as "native-speakerism".

As mentioned above, the International Department was run as a virtually separate institution from its parent. Interestingly, its isolated approach to internationalization may not be unique in Japan. For instance, several readers of The Japan Times commented on an editorial about the University of Tokyo's international program, which is taught entirely in English. One commenter's criticism has parallels with the situation at University A:

…this "globalized" program is fully isolated from the "mainstream" University of Tokyo schools and courses. You can't just put 20 chairs in a classroom with all foreigners and an English speaking professor and say this is "globalization". This is just a QUARANTINE station (Zyb Ghaij, 2015).

The situation in the International Department was not as stark as the one described above in that the school aimed to integrate its Japanese and international populations once the Japanese students had progressed from the first-year English for academic purposes (EAP) program. However, even if the International Department's international faculty were considered a means of importing diversity to a largely homogenous society (i.e. Japan), an analysis of the faculty composition reveals that the school faculty was internally quite homogenous. Aside from the Japanese teachers, only two others would have been considered a visible minority in the United States. In addition, only two full-time faculty members were female (i.e. approximately 10% of the faculty) and neither was in a senior position (e.g. dean, program director, full professor).

Analysis at a National Cultural Level

Japan has a complex and changing history with internationalization. During the 1980s, Japan agreed to work with the United States to allow American universities to establish branch campuses in Japan, partly for education reasons, but also to ease the trade tensions of the time (Fukurai & Kataoka, 1992, p. 85). This created a "branch campus bubble" that corresponded with the Japanese economic bubble (Altbach, 2011). Altbach (2011) notes that of the more than 20 American branch campuses that opened in Japan in the 1980s, only two survived, and explains that differing cultural expectations were a large source of trouble for the failed branches. The International Department is not a branch campus, but it shares many of the same values of the American branch schools, and potentially many of the same problems.

The International Department promotes itself as an American-style college. Presumably though, the school would like to avoid the mistakes and situations that caused the closure of American branches. With a Japanese university as its parent, the department has eliminated the lack of Japanese Ministry of Education accreditation that plagued the branch schools (Pollack, 1994). Also, as an integral part of a Japanese university, the department's financial backing is apt to be secure longer than that of branch campuses that relied upon external local partners. However, McMurtrie (2000) lists several other areas where the American schools faced difficulties owing to the difference of their cultural values, such as: over-estimating the demand for an American-style education; under-estimating the difficulties students would have with English-language instruction; misunderstanding Japanese students' expectations of the workload in higher education; and facing resistance from other Japanese institutions to accept their participation in the education system.

To further analyze the challenges of operating an "American-style" higher education institution in Japan, Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimension's theory is insightful. Hofstede (2001) identified six major cultural dimensions that allow for the broad comparison of cultures: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Of course, Japan and the United States have many aspects in common as relatively stable democracies and developed economies, but comparing the cultures of the two with Hofstede's (2013) data reveals interesting differences, especially in the areas of masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, individualism, and indulgence.

Hofstede (2013) gives Japanese culture a much higher rating for masculinity than American culture, with respective scores of 95 and 62 out of a 100. This is not a comparison of machismo, but rather an indicator of how driven a society is by competition. Japan's high masculinity score indicates a greater emphasis on service to the workplace, whereas American culture places more of a value on quality of life (Hofstede, n.d.). This difference has an impact on the cultural expectation of how many hours of work one should do and where one's responsibilities to the organization begin and end. In this regard, I witnessed several Japanese colleagues putting in longer hours than their foreign colleagues, which may have caused some feelings of resentment.

Uncertainty avoidance is a measure of how tolerant a culture is for unforeseen situations. Japan's score of 92 (out of 100) indicates a very low tolerance for the unknown, while America's score of 46 indicates a relative acceptance of it (Hofstede, 2013). This contrast can lead to conflict as Japanese are more likely to expect highly detailed plans far in advance of events, whereas Americans are more comfortable with rougher outlines prepared closer to the time of the events. Similarly, Japan's score of 88 for long-term orientation suggests a tendency to think in terms of long-term plans; America's score of 26 is at the opposite end of the spectrum and suggests a preference for measuring success in terms of short-term goals (Hofstede, 2013). In the case of the International Department, some foreign faculty members appeared to bristle at requirements for what they perceived to be overly detailed curriculum plans that restricted their ability to react appropriately to changing circumstances.

America's score of 91 on the individualism scale indicates a highly individualistic culture. This contrasts sharply with Japan's score of 48, which indicates a much more collectivistic society (Hofstede, 2013). Finally, indulgence measures to what degree people control their impulses, with a low score indicating restraint and a high score indicating people feel more freedom to pursue their desires (Hofstede, n.d.). Japan's score of 42 indicates a culture of restraint and America's score of 68

(Hofstede, 2013). This may be reflected in Japanese reluctance to openly criticize their work seniors, while foreign faculty are more likely to be openly critical. Also, it may be reflected in Japanese acceptance of working longer hours, while foreign faculty were more likely to see a good work-life balance as important. Foreign faculty members who were openly critical of management in the International Department likely presented a challenge for the parent university, which would have had little experience in dealing with such overt expressions of dissatisfaction.

Taken all together these differences can result in significantly different expectations and practices by Japanese and Americans in higher education. Some of these differences were embraced by the International Department as a way of setting the school apart from its Japanese competitors. For example, the school presented itself as a place for students to develop themselves as creative, critically-thinking, independent individuals rather than becoming people who blindly follow the crowd. On the other hand, some of these cultural differences may themselves have constituted blind spots for the school.

Identifying Issues

In discussing the International Department's relationship to social capital above, two broad problem areas emerge: social equity issues related to the composition of the faculty; and identity issues stemming from the school's concept of internationalization and separateness.

Social equity and faculty composition

The gender imbalance, the lack of international diversity, and the lack of Japanese representation amongst the faculty reflected poorly on the International Department's commitment to social equity and had a negative impact on its ability to develop social capital both locally and abroad. If we analyze the impact in terms of Narayan and Cassidy's (2001) dimensions of social capital, this imbalance may have affected the generalized norms of the institution, the everyday sociability for some members, and a sense of trust. For example, there was the danger that some stakeholders would come to feel that the management was an impenetrable old boys' club. This lack of diversity potentially meant the students were less likely to engage with a variety of voices. It also meant a lack of positive female, Japanese, and minority role models for them and for junior faculty members. Also, importantly, the lack of Japanese faculty made the development of neighborhood connections and trust much more difficult (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001).

Internationalization and identity

Working to educate students who go can go beyond their local context sounds positive, but is problematic when the result is graduates who are only capable of working outside of their home context. This elevation of American culture raises five concerns: First, Japanese students may come to see American culture as an ideal to emulate at the expense of their identity as Japanese. Moreover, this may seem to be an impossible ideal with no Japanese faculty members engaging with the Japanese students as role models. Second, the image of Japan presented to the international students was largely presented from a Western perspective with only about 10% of the faculty coming from Japan. Third, local employers may become wary about hiring students without a connection to the local context or any high level courses taken through the Japanese language. Fourth, in focusing so intensely on the global level, the department may find itself unable to build social capital with local

stakeholders, including Japanese faculty and students in other departments of University A, tuition-paying parents, high schools, potential students from Japan and abroad, local employers, community groups, and the Ministry of Education.

Possible Actions for Improvement

There is a risk in creating a new organization, that its aspirational goals are unachievable, at least in the short-term. Fukurai and Kataoka (1992, p. 101) advise that an international university operating in Japan needs to make clear priorities and achievable goals. There are several actions the International Department could take to address the problems outlined above, the most important being a shift in perspective. The ambition to be a world-class institution is admirable, but it cannot come at the expense of the local community, and may not even be possible without engagement at the local level. This brings to mind the famous saying, "Think globally, act locally". From this change in attitude, other changes flow, many of which likely apply to other higher education institutions.

First, drawing on the lesson of Hofstede's cultural comparisons, the school should be sensitive to the cultural values of the local community and work to build positive relationships with other stakeholder institutions, including high schools; the parent university; and potential employers for the students. To do this the school should clarify to its foreign faculty that the expectations of their Japanese students extend beyond the classroom. It would be helpful to conduct a needs analysis that takes into consideration what Japanese students, their parents, and potential employers expect a four-year degree will prepare the students to be able to do. Likewise, it is also important to communicate to the Japanese students and their parents that they will be given more autonomy and expected to take more responsibility for their studies.

Second, to help the Japanese students learn about their own culture, the International Department could include some content courses conducted in Japanese. This would help the students to learn about their own culture so that they could be ambassadors when coming into contact with people from other cultures. Taking university level courses in Japanese would also allay Japanese employers' fears that the students were proficient in academic Japanese. In addition, the requirement for the EAP program should be based on one's English ability rather than nationality; The curriculum was designed so that all Japanese nationals were required to take the program, while foreigners were exempt, which was a discriminatory practice.

Third, and also related to issues of Japanese identity, care should be taken when advertising the school to the Japanese public. Even though some Japanese may be attracted by the prospect of an American-style education in Japan, the International Department took an unnecessary risk in promoting its foreign lecturers and style of education as superior to Japanese higher education as a whole. In particular, care should be taken in public relations materials and activities to avoid sending the message that American ways are superior and Japanese ways inferior.

Fourth, related to the composition of the faculty, a review of the hiring process from how positions were advertised to how candidates were interviewed is advised. It would be better to actively seek out qualified female and local candidates rather than over-relying on former coworkers, which can reinforce the sense of an old boys' network. Moreover, rather than leaving the hiring to individuals in management, a panel format could increase a sense of shared responsibility amongst faculty members and broaden the perspective of the school as it seeks new faculty members.

Fifth, to encourage collaboration and develop social capital, the International Department could share facilities with University A, which are only steps away. This would increase the opportunities for interaction between students, staff, and faculty of the International Department and other departments of the parent university. Technically, the International Department students were allowed to use University A's facilities (e.g. the library, the sports facilities, the student lounge, the cafeterias) but in reality few did. Partly, this was a function of the International Department's facilities being brand new and very self-contained. The International Department had its own on-site cafeteria, which was not open to outside students. Unfortunately, this sent the mistaken message to many University A students that the entire International Department building was off limits to them. Actively sharing facilities would contribute to building goodwill in the larger university community.

Sixth, to further develop social capital within University A, the International Department could be opened to students from other departments and vice versa. This would have to be handled tactfully, so as not to step on the toes of established programs within the university, and the department's different calendar may pose some logistical challenges, but it might be feasible to designate some courses as transferrable across departments. Japanese professors from other departments could be encouraged to develop English versions of their courses, and international students in the International Department who were proficient enough in Japanese could take courses in Japanese at University A. If the formal opening of classes across departments was not possible, short non-credit courses or workshops could be developed and opened to all. Either way, this kind of collaboration could help to encourage a more meaningful, less American-centric form of internationalization. Moreover, taking this step and the others described above could help the International Department to become more integrated into its community and develop stronger social capital.

Seventh, to ensure evidence-based teaching practices and to contribute to the knowledge of the wider academic community, professors in the International Department should be encouraged to conduct and publish research. Furthermore, an institutional review board should be implemented to promote ethical research. The department considered itself to be a teaching-focused school, which on its surface appeared to be in keeping with its commitment to a student-centered approach. However, in practice this meant research was not required, and unlike tenured professors, they were not actively encouraged to apply for external research grants. This was a missed opportunity to improve the quality of the teaching internally and building social capital externally.

Finally, the school should work to cultivate an environment in which each and every student, faculty member, and member of management feels like they can thrive and contribute. For an organization to be successful, it needs to learn, and in the words of Senge (1990), "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn." It is essential to create open, multidirectional channels between management, faculty, students, and other stakeholders, so that each is able to explain their approach to achieving success for the school. It may appear to the different groups that they are working at cross-purposes, when in reality all want the school to succeed. Steps towards creating such an environment could include: creating clear guidelines and processes to ensure a safe environment, free of harassment; setting individual annual goals and reflecting on one's progress at year-end; sharing meeting minutes in a timely manner and providing the opportunity to respond to collectively-produced documents; holding information sessions to update faculty and staff on the status of student recruitment, school finances, and other matters, such as curriculum reform; providing grants for action research projects deemed to be of benefit to the institution; holding teacher/staff workshops to

encourage the sharing of best practices; and hosting academic conferences to encourage the spread of ideas and the building of relationships.

Areas of Positive Social Capital Building

In identifying issues related to social capital, this paper has adopted a largely critical perspective. However, it should be noted that the International Department undertook several initiatives that enabled it to foster ties with the wider community. Notably, it established a diverse collection of international partnerships with universities in more than 20 countries; worked to recruit fee-paying students from outside of Japan; and established an international advisory board. These steps add to the diversity of the institution and grow its global connections. The school also attempted to foster strong bonds between its international students and Japanese students by requiring all students to reside in its mixed-nationality dormitory on campus.

In terms of the local community, the International Department invited local elders to conduct traditional craft workshops with the aim of students and faculty participating in a major local festival. The school also sent teachers and international students to the parent school's kindergarten to interact with the children there. In addition, it has held events that have been open to the wider community, and have allowed other groups to use its facilities for events such as summer camps.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the complexity of developing a powerful, international learning environment due to the various needs of stakeholders and the ever-changing concept of what a university is meant to be. While many universities appear to be heading toward an "academic capitalism" model in an effort to survive in a competitive economic environment, Barnett (2011) suggests that they aim to become "ecological universities", which make their resources available to their communities. In moving the focus from themselves, to the needs of the wider society, universities can make themselves indispensable institutions.

As a case study, this paper has examined the International Department and its challenges in becoming such an institution. Some of these challenges are the same ones facing all Japanese higher education institutions, such as the demographic issues we have discussed. However, some of the obstacles are more specific to the International Department's values and practices. I identified problem areas related to the school's narrowly presenting internationalization through an American lens; and its lack of social equity in its hiring practices. For possible solutions, I recommended that the school adopt a broader view of internationalization; adopt more equitable hiring practices; strive to foster connections with the parent school by sharing facilities, allowing students to study across departments, and collaborating more on a variety of levels from informal workshops to formal courses. While these suggestions apply specifically to the International Department, it is hoped that they may also be of use to other higher education institutions, particularly in non-English speaking countries, that strive to make their international programs serve both global and local needs.

The International Department is still in its infancy, so changes made now could have a significant and long-lasting impact. Major changes requiring Ministry of Education approval will take time, but the shift in attitude can begin immediately. And if the institution were to implement the detailed changes outlined above, it would increase its appeal to both international and Japanese stakeholders, and, increase its chances of succeeding, where the majority of American branch

campuses failed, by positioning itself as a unique, meaningful, and connected institution in Japanese higher education.

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