

Managing and measuring: A few philosophical thoughts about university in times of change

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In my university, a Japanese national university, I used to be a *gaikokujinkyoshi*, a foreign lecturer, and therefore quite an outsider. With the incorporation of Japanese national universities, the biggest change in my professional life happened because the foreign lecturer positions were abolished. In 2005, I became an associate professor, and I can now take part in everything my Japanese colleagues do – which also means that I can take part in managing the university. My research and teaching interests include not only language, but also philosophy and Japanese studies, and I found that this makes the Japanese university system and its changing situation interesting for me as a research subject. I even enjoy sitting in faculty and committee meetings! Really!

This paper is a modified version of my conference presentation, and I want to maintain the atmosphere of giving a talk. Please ‘listen’, think along and imagine the situation in your university, or maybe your school or other institution. My thoughts are somewhat limited to the situation at Japanese national universities; but part of what I want to think about with you is probably also true for those of you who work, for example, in a high school or in a language school, or those of you who teach in several different institutions at the same time.

I want to look at a few of the changes my university is going through, and – in the Okayama conference spirit, and since I am no managing or measuring expert – I want to look at them as a narrator of an experience. I also want to look at them with a philosophical attitude, by which I mean that after the first look I want to take a step back and look again. I also want to use the term philosophical in the sense that I will ask some questions and let them end in *aporia* instead of giving answers. I hope that simple awareness of certain questions can help some of us who are dealing with the discomforts of change to remain open-minded.

Change

It is not my purpose here to explain at length the whole structural reform of the Japanese national university system, but I want to remind you of the reform’s main three parts (Kraemer, 2003, p. 22):

1. *Scrap and build* (which leads, for example, to mergers between universities)
2. Financing universities based on external evaluation and creating 30 top-level universities
3. Incorporation of the national universities, which means among other things new management structures and methods

Because of the demographic changes in Japan, the competition between universities to attract students is growing. My university is constantly comparing its education, research, and management structures with other Japanese universities, and even with universities around the world. We are under pressure to improve, and we are creating a lot of plans for our future.

Are appearances deceiving?

Let me tell you about the first item that was on a list of plans for the future of my university. It ran something like this: Let us become proud of our university and create a new university logo, a university song, and a monument at the university gate. We have actually now carried this out, and therefore have a new logo, a song, and a monument. This has created some laughter among people who work and study at my university, including myself, but I will take my first philosophical step back here and ask: Are things like a logo, a song or a monument of no importance for an institution? We might consider them ‘just for show’, but is ‘show’ not important? Are appearances unimportant? Why then does the green logo on my new business card make me feel good?

And the monument – some people call it weird or ugly – and while I tend to agree with them, I found to my own surprise that I don't necessarily dislike the existence of something like that at the university gate. Why is that? Does the 'show' have an influence not only on feelings, but also on attitudes, and on actions? Does 'show' lead to a reality here; that is, to an improvement of our work and of the students' studies? How could an improvement be measured, especially measured opposed to 'what if we had spent the money for something else; for example, to employ an additional teacher?'

New measures

When I try to grasp what my university is basically about right now, looking at the items on the evaluation form for professors can be one way to find out. Please don't think that an 'evaluation form for professors' is something that helps teachers evaluate students. At my university, teachers receive evaluation now, too, which is something very new for us, something that will need a lot of getting used to, and something I want to think about with you here. The evaluation has four parts: research, teaching, university management and contributions to society. Does the evaluation structure with its four parts depict our work reality, or is this structure a construction with an arbitrary division and separation? If the latter is true, could this hinder our freedom of creativity and our productivity?

At the moment, the evaluation process runs like this: professors put data about their activities in research, teaching, university management and contributions to society into an online evaluation form. In each faculty, the data of the faculty members are then evaluated according to certain rules by the dean and an evaluation committee consisting of faculty members. Professors get points for each of the four activity areas, and a ranking in comparison to other members of the same faculty. The result will eventually have a bearing on salaries.

Can the evaluation process be objective and the results exact? Points and rankings look exact. When rankings and salaries are involved, we probably don't want to allow subjectivity or inexactness. Among the data professors have to provide for the evaluation are items that are probably objective and easy to check, like the number of classes we taught, or the committees we were on in the academic year in question. Other items are problematic; for example, the number of hours spent working for a certain committee. Some of us might exaggerate those numbers. On the other hand, some of us might be too modest or want to avoid looking like slow workers. And did we ever count those hours anyway? Not to mention the problem that there is no evaluation of the quality of the work. We shouldn't forget what lies hidden inside the 'exact' results: a lot of subjective and inexact parts.

Nevertheless, I do believe that the evaluation I will soon receive for the first time from my faculty, which means from the dean and a small committee of colleagues, will be quite fair. How can that be after what I said in the previous paragraph? Well, 'fair' and 'exact' are two different things. I trust the dean and my colleagues on the evaluation committee to interpret my data in such a way that a somewhat fair ranking will be achieved. Not a perfect one, not an exact one, a somewhat fair one, a somewhat valid one. I trust that my colleagues and the dean are able to get to that point because they know me and they know what I did or at least have an impression of what I did in the academic year in question. Our evaluation rules, by the way, ensure that a conversation about the evaluation result can take place between the evaluator and the person being evaluated, and that this conversation might change the result somewhat.

What does this tell us? Is a mixture of numbers, hours and points on the one hand, and knowing each other and communication on the other hand, the most likely way to reach a fair and valid result? Can we ever measure whether this kind of evaluation will improve our teaching, our research or our management performance, rather than do harm? And can we measure how much improvement (or how much harm) it will bring? The evaluation process might waste energy which we would rather give to our students. What about the time we need to fill out evaluation forms or input data into websites? What about the time spent on uncreative, nonproductive labor like this? What about these additional working hours? Did anybody ever calculate them? What about the money they cost, together with the cost of setting up the evaluation system? The working climate might also suffer; for example, because of animosities between jealous colleagues, and work would most likely become less effective. Evaluation might also take away the *joyu*

to be creative and come up with ideas for improvement which the university, the faculty, our colleagues, we ourselves, and our students can really profit from.

Yoyu

There is no English word that covers all the usages of the Japanese word *yoyu*, although it can easily be translated into the German language using the German word *Spielraum*. *Yoyu* or *Spielraum* can mean leeway, it can mean free space or time to use for something, and it can also mean flexibility. The described kind of evaluation could mean a loss of *yoyu* because those being evaluated might feel compelled to do what looks best on the evaluation form, instead of what they actually think is best for their research, their students, or the university. Doing what is best could mean constant adjustment to new situations and different needs on a daily basis and in negotiation with colleagues and students, without concerns about the evaluation pattern. While filling out the evaluation form, I found myself thinking about and calculating these things. For example, according to one of the evaluation rules, if I am on at least five committees in a given academic year, I will automatically receive the highest of three possible evaluation results in the area 'university management'. I am actually on ten committees this year. Should I, therefore, attempt to get out of as many as I can of the 'too many' committees and try to keep it down to exactly five next year because 'too much' work will not be rewarded? Will I begin to balance the amount of work in the four areas so that I can get as good an overall evaluation as possible? I never used to think, 'Don't do too much, do only as much as necessary' before, and I don't want to think like that!

On the other hand, evaluation could be considered a measure of support in our fight against laziness or other self-discipline problems. The evaluation form asks for an outline of our research plans, which might help us structure our thoughts and get organized. Therefore, it might to some extent improve working performance, though I wouldn't know how to measure that extent. Is there a fear that we cannot be good enough without extrinsic motivation through measures like evaluation? I wonder how professors in my native country Germany would feel if somebody suggested an evaluation system to them like the one at my university. In Germany, university professors usually have to have both a doctorate and a so-called *Habilitation* – which is something like a second and bigger doctorate – to be allowed to become professors. Could we say that in the German system, professors who have gone through their doctorate and *Habilitation* have learnt and experienced so much, and have gone through such rigid discipline that excellence will prevail, and that those professors can be left alone without further evaluation? (But excellence and laziness can live together in the same person). Incidentally, German universities have begun to introduce certain types of evaluation, too.

How can we measure which is more productive; a relaxed – or lax? – system; or a demanding – or stifling? – one? Can we know how many professors were being deprived of the stimulation to develop their full potential in a lax system (or how many professors even abused such a system); and how many, on the other hand, became especially creative and productive in a relaxed system, enjoying a certain amount of freedom from patterns and rules? Will we miss out on maybe just one single genius or one revolutionary idea in the future because patterns, rules, and evaluations nipped him, her, or it in the bud? Even if we can, to some extent, compare the evaluation result of one professor with that of another in the same university, it is impossible to compare one and the same professor in one and the same situation with an evaluation system and one without. This is true not only for professors, but also for whole universities. The same situation cannot exist twice, with and without evaluation, for comparison. (I apologize for stating something so obvious, but I felt compelled to remind myself of that fact).

Can we accept imperfection?

One aim of the new measures such as the described evaluation system seems to be to make our universities foolproof against human weakness like laziness; maybe following a general tendency in many areas of public life to perfect systems, rules or laws, so that no loopholes are left. There are areas of life where we need the idea of perfection, and where we should come as close to perfection as we can, but aren't there other areas where we can accept the idea of imperfection? I am no expert on airplanes, nuclear power plants or dangerous equipment, but I imagine that safety systems here are close to perfect. In institutions like universities, however, we can afford the *yoyu* of imperfection. I believe we even need it.

Accepting imperfection does not mean giving up improvement. It doesn't even mean giving up evaluation. We could still use points, numbers and rankings in evaluation (with the awareness that these only give us the illusion of exactness), but we would also gain the *yoyu* to choose other methods and expressions. We could evaluate ourselves and each other using such 'inexact' things as words and sentences. I can imagine a communicative feedback and evaluation network of individuals, teams, departments and other groups in my university, and individuals and groups outside the university but connected with it. I can imagine a network of mutual accountability, negotiated among all of us so that we feel assured of – not exactness and objectivity – but of fairness and result validity. Such a communicative evaluation might make it much easier to cover not only the quantity, but also the quality of the work. It might also foster an attitude of more continuous and relentless endeavor to improve and develop because language and personal conversation will probably go deeper and leave a bigger impression than points and numbers. A communicative way of evaluating could serve the need for accountability while being able to take more into account; even, for example, a temporary personal setback to a professor because of an illness. Accepting imperfection gives us more options for improvement.

Evaluation in some shape or form is probably here to stay in my university, and maybe in your institution, too. One thing to do is to use evaluation as best we can for our own development, for example, to achieve more self-discipline or to structure thoughts and plans. At the same time we might be able to influence the shape or form of the evaluation through feedback. The evaluation system at my university gives us *yoyu* for feedback and will certainly go through changes in the near future. I will take part in the feedback, watch the changes, and use my university's evaluation system as a stimulation to investigate the concepts of imperfection, inexactness, and *yoyu* further.

... you still owe me the definition of exactness.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 69

Reference

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