# Attitudes and Intentions of Japanese Students and Teachers in Internal Quality Assurance in a Confucian-Heritage Culture

Masahiro Tanaka
University of Tsukuba

## Abstract

In this reflective essay, I write from my perspective as a member of the Office of Management for Teaching and Learning at the University of Tsukuba, about what I see as the attitudes and intentions that are conducive to partnership, focusing on pedagogical partnership. Specifically, I aim to clarify my attitudes and intentions, along with the attitudes and intentions of students who participated in internal quality assurance activities, as well as those of the teachers who worked in partnership with these students. These efforts to name and clarify the attitudes and intentions required in order to form successful student-staff pedagogical partnerships in a Confucian-heritage culture demonstrate that it is essential to adapt the Western idea of 'students as partners' within the Eastern context. I begin with a discussion of Japan as a Confucian-heritage culture, describe the University of Tsukuba's effort to position students as partners to teachers in internal quality assurance and my role in that effort, and conclude with a discussion of the attitudes and intentions that students and teachers brought to this work.

## Introduction

In the third seven-year cycle of accreditation in Japan, universities are expected to further enhance their internal quality assurance by regularly self-evaluating their teaching and learning quality. Such self-evaluation can potentially become a formality when teachers feel complacent towards their institution. Therefore, accreditation agencies have advocated the direct involvement of students in internal quality assurance to create rigour in self-evaluation. However, unless universities build up 'trust' based on the shared belief that students are knowledgeable enough to assume responsibility for internal quality assurance, teachers may not take student feedback seriously and students may also avoid giving critical feedback to teachers. Unlike in Western countries, building trust with the students is not easy in countries or regions deeply rooted in a Confucian-heritage culture, such as China, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Singapore. This is because teachers and students share a more distinct hierarchical relationship; as a result, many teachers as well as students strongly resist the idea of an equal partnership between them. To explain such resistance to Western researchers, I draw on my own story because *"the use of narratives as a methodology permits life-like accounts of individual experience and offer[s] an opportunity to value the experience of others"* (Hall, 2014: 386).

## A Confucian-Heritage Culture

Confucianism is an ancient philosophy that presupposes the moral relations of individuals or groups in a society regulated strictly by ethical norms. Moral relations denote the obligation of the youth to follow the instructions of respected elders, such as parents and teachers.

These relations often appear in the field of education. Indeed, Dennehy (2015: 823) highlights that *"Confucian teaching on the nature of society and education places an emphasis on obedience to parents, teachers, and elders. They stress the harmony of social relationships, the suppression of emotions and the importance of following the correct social order".* In my personal experience of teaching at several Japanese universities, students, when questioned, were likely to look for the right answer from me rather than try to find it. In other words, students are often passive learners.

Such Confucian-heritage culture can hinder the implementation of student engagement, especially the idea of students as partners, in the East. Cultural barriers, such as the teacher-student dichotomy and the belief that the teacher is always right, therefore make partnership work more challenging from a cultural perspective (Kaur 2020). Liang and Matthews (2021) also note that the largely Western principles of partnership practice do not always translate well in Eastern contexts. Such a cultural barriers exists in Japan as well. Working to involve students as partners in internal quality assurance at the University of Tsukuba, I noticed that there was a tendency to only engage with the best performing students, a clear example of a cultural barrier.

## The Case of the University of Tsukuba

The University of Tsukuba is a member of the RU11 (Research University 11) in Japan, equivalent to the Russell Group in the UK. In May 2020, this university enrolled 16,586 students (9,797 undergraduates and 6,789 postgraduates), 2,251 of whom are from overseas. On 1st April 2020, the University began to monitor (simple annual inspections) and perform programme reviews (detailed inspections conducted once every seven years) to systematically review the quality of education at the programme level. In the same month, the Office of Management for Teaching and Learning was established as a university-wide organisation responsible for these regular inspections. Prior to this, an Implementation & Preparation Office was set up between April 2019 and March 2020 to oversee the design of the monitoring and programme review systems. As a member of the Preparation Office, I participated in designing these systems. Our emphasis was not 'evaluation for evaluation's sake' but 'evaluation for quality enhancement'. Therefore, we drew on established European initiatives as models in designing these quality improvement evaluation systems, many of which came from the 2015 edition of the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ESG). ESG emphasises the inclusion of all stakeholders (especially students) in internal quality assurance, and as a result we deemed it important that the Programme Review Committee include not only internal members (teachers from the University) but also external members (such as teachers from other universities) and students from the University.

To achieve this consensus, the first thing I did was introduce the other members to my research articles and books on student engagement, drawing on works published in Japan as well as worldwide, and emphasising that student engagement is a global trend. The attitude I brought to this introduction of student engagement was a strong belief in the importance of the student perspective in quality assurance and the intention of aligning our particular efforts at the University of Tsukuba with the international trend toward embracing this belief. While the initial reaction of the members was not so positive, their reaction changed when I introduced ESG. There are two reasons for this. First, the University of

Tsukuba is a global university with active academic exchanges with European universities (e.g., running joint degree programmes). Therefore, it was easy for the members to accept European models of internal quality assurance systems. Second, Japanese accreditation agencies value ESG highly (one of these accreditation agencies that published the Japanese version of ESG). In other words, if we could achieve internal quality assurance consistent with ESG principles, the accreditation agency would be favourable towards us. Therefore, by introducing a well-respected set of quality assurance standards, I was able to influence the attitudes of my colleagues.

This shift in attitude notwithstanding, the idea of inviting students to participate as formal committee members was still novel in the Japanese context. In anticipation of strong opposition from within the University, we modified the European model instead of imitating it entirely. For this modification, we focused on the method used for selecting student committee members and on the student to non-student ratio in the committee.
First, the student union would be not able to elect student members, unlike in Europe; this is due to the risk of objections such as, 'Is it possible for students to select the right person for the job?' Instead, we compromised: the head of the governing body of the programme undergoing review recommended suitable student committee member candidates (as well as external committee member candidates) to the head of the Office of Management for Teaching and Learning.

While this seemed necessary to shift the attitudes of those involved in the development of this evaluation, I was disappointed with this compromise because it runs the risk of reproducing the tendency to select 'excellent students' rather than draw in a more inclusive group. The head of the organisation under evaluation is potentially more likely to select a quiet and obedient student who does not speak frankly and communicate the problems of the organisation being evaluated. However, despite my awareness of this disadvantage, I prioritised incorporating student committee members to the programme review committee, acting as effectively as I could on my intention to include students in the quality assurance process.

Second, my idea of increasing the proportion of students on the committee to 50%—following the European model—was also abandoned because a member of the Preparatory Office indicated that too many students would make the teachers wary that those students would have too much voice. Accordingly, an alternative plan was adopted, limiting the number of student committee members to one. This alternative plan also necessitated one external committee member and at least two internal committee members. Additionally, to ease any apprehension towards having student committee members, the importance of evaluations being based on rubrics set by the entire university rather than personal opinions or values was emphasised. It was also stressed that any information obtained through the programme review should not be disclosed outside the University. Although I was disappointed by this series of amendments because I felt it curtailed the students' voices once again, I considered it important compromise in order to prioritise students' participation in the programme review.

Remarkably, there were some dissenting opinions about the success of the above-mentioned amendments in suppressing teachers' antipathy. However, the proposed monitoring and programme review design was successfully approved by the University

without further amendments. In the proposal, the term ‘partner’ is used to refer to the student committee member to demonstrate the member’s effort in improving education in collaboration with other committee members. I strongly supported the use of this term. Nonetheless, other members did not perceive that it implies that the students’ equal footing with teachers, rather they expected that the students’ role was merely to express their opinion from a student’s perspective and assist in the programme reviews. Their attitude was to promote the student committee member’s position as equivalent to that of an assistant partner. I finally agreed with them that this attitude can make it possible for students to work alongside teachers in quality assurance.

Although the monitoring and programme review from the design to implementation stage had to be rushed, it started in April 2020 as planned. This programme review will be conducted for all degree programmes within seven years in preparation for a seven-year certified evaluation and accreditation cycle. In AY 2020 and AY 2021, 21 and 18 programmes were reviewed, respectively. As the committee members who examine each programme oversee multiple programmes, seven student committee members were selected both in AY 2020 and AY 2021, amounting to 14 students in two years. As previously explained, the student members are selected by the head of the Office of Management for Teaching and Learning based on the recommendation of the head of the educational organisation under evaluation. It is technically possible to select students other than those recommended, however, there have been no such cases in the last two years.

## Student and Teacher Attitudes and Intentions in Partnering for Quality Assurance

While my attitudes and intentions played a major role in developing the approach to internal quality assurance as I described above, attitudes and intentions of students and teachers shaped how the model worked in practice. Moreover, their selection process was an important factor in determining the attitudes of student committee members. The student members were recommended by the head of the organisation being evaluated, indicating that the head of the organisation trusts that student. In Confucian culture, this is a great honour for a student. Additionally, the student committee members expressed their wish to meet the expectations of the person by whom they were recommended. The attitude of the student members—the belief that they were being honoured and had the responsibility of doing a good job—guided their intentions to meet the high expectations placed on them.

My impression, based on informal conversations with faculty members who participated in the programme reviews, is that the heads of these organisations take seriously the opinions of students who excel academically. Therefore, it was expected hoped that they would speak frankly and point out areas related to education that could be improved, and indeed, some faculty members expressed their joy at the useful comments student members made during the programme review. Likewise, one student committee member mentioned that it was a pleasure for her to see ‘her’ teacher smiling at her when she made a comment during the programme review. These expressions of appreciation affirmed the student attitudes of commitment and their intention to contribute to quality assurance in meaningful ways.

However, the attitudes the faculty members tended to have when students participated in the evaluation activities were not clear. Although the University's guidance for the monitoring and programme review uses the term 'partner' in Japanese, owing to a common understanding that the student members were not evaluation experts, the attitude that student members were merely playing a supplementary role had not shifted. However, because the faculty members being evaluated were the ones who chose the student representatives, and mutual trust between both parties seemed to be already established, there may have been more willingness to listen closely to the statements made by the student members. The attitudes faculty members developed that allowed them to listen to the student perspectives were possible because of this trust.

I personally witnessed several instances in which this shift in attitude was apparent. One student committee member stated that the faculty members performing the evaluation and the faculty members being evaluated were only talking about the results of the evaluation during the discussion in the programme review; however, the student said that they should have talked about how the results could be used to improve learning and teaching. His opinion was presented at a meeting of the Office of Management for Teaching and Learning, and it impressed many members of the Office and resulted in a reconsideration of the nature of dialogue in the programme reviews. Another student member pointed out the inadequacies of the syllabus, a comment which later resulted in the holding of a faculty development session to improve the syllabus.

I also saw a shift in attitude of both the faculty members performing the evaluations and those being evaluated, and this consequently shaped their intentions of allowing student participation. The faculty members conducting the evaluation felt that a key benefit that raw data that could not be ascertained from the self-evaluation report prepared by the faculty members being evaluated could now be obtained. In other words, the intention of the faculty members performing the evaluation was to reap these benefits. Faculty members being evaluated also shared that it was beneficial that the student representative could point out problems they had overlooked. These perceptions held by the faculty members may have been the result of repeatedly emphasising the merits of the idea of having students participate in the programme review, during the period when the proposal went through university approval process. The attitudes teachers developed were shaped in part by the reiteration of the benefits of partnering with students in quality assurance, as well as their actual experiences of that partnering.

## Conclusion

Many Western researchers may regard students' participation in quality assurance at the University of Tsukuba as incomplete. For example, the student representative chosen by the faculty would probably not represent the average student. Indeed, when this selection method of student representative was proposed, I thought that it was not ideal, however, I later realised that the way Western students participate is not the only correct means of doing so. This is because it is not the method of student engagement itself but rather the stimulation of student learning and improvement of education quality brought about by student engagement that is important.

I sincerely hope that we will be able to develop a student engagement system for quality assurance in East Asia. I am very positive about such a future despite the cultural barriers, in the same way that Chng (2019: 1) anticipates for Singapore: *"The caveat remains—it would not necessarily be an easy, unproblematic, uncontentious partnership—but I am now more optimistic that we can work to enable such partnerships to happen, even in Singapore, if only to a degree."*


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