TIFO30th Anniversary Essay Contest
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A degree in Japanese Studies

Seventeen years ago, I graduated with an MA in Japanese Studies from the University of Edinburgh. Before graduating, I applied with graduate trainee programs of global companies but was not invited to a single interview. The only application which resulted in an interview was that for a position as Coordinator of International Relations on the JET program. I was offered a position and spent the next three years working in a city hall. As I wanted to further improve my Japanese skills, moving to Japan seemed a logical step. When my contract ran out in 2005, I looked into positions which enabled me to use the language. Most of the positions proposed by recruitment agencies in Europe and Japan seemed to lack learning opportunities. I did not want to work as receptionist for a Japanese company in Frankfurt or wear a uniform at a hinge manufacturer in Tokyo.

In January 2006, I started working for a German certification body in Yokohama and learned about the relation between notified body and accreditation bodies, about EU directives, ISO and IEC standards, JSE standards, quality management and later about the design requirements for failure-safe systems. I still work for TUV Rheinland Japan to this day. As somebody whose only MINT background was A-level mathematics, the job is challenging at the same time highly stimulating:

What law is applicable to operate a new type of biomass plant in Japan?

Can I find an expert to conduct welding inspections in Kazakhstan?

How much will our Brazilian colleagues charge for inspections at local steel plants?

Amidst my daily fight with terminology in three languages, a friend took me to a *rakugo* (落語) show in 2010. I was captivated by format and language. One actor sits on the stage, all on his (or her) own and enacts all the characters in his performance. Some stories were easy to understand; I could barely understand others due to their Edo-dialect and vocabulary. I could not join the audience laughing and felt betrayed that all the years I had spent improving my Japanese seemed useless - naturally none of the vocabulary on electric, electronic and programmable electronic systems was useful. I started going to the *yose*-theatre[1] on my own.

In 2010, my friend now back in Europe, suggested I took a *rakugoka* (落語家 *rakugo* performer) to organize a show for his students. In 2011, two *rakugo* presented their art in front of students of Japanese - in Japanese with supertitles in German. Post-show we included a short Q&A session to give students the opportunity to learn more about the profession.

One thing led to another and today, I have taken fifteen *rakugoka* to show their art in museums, culture centres and seventeen different Japanese Studies departments. Early in

[1] Yose (寄席): Theatre exclusively staging *rakugo*, as well as other *yose* arts such as *manzai* (漫才), *kōdan* (講談), *rōkyoku* (浪曲).

the history of conducting these tours, several academics suggested I write a dissertation about the topic. In 2016, I enrolled in the PhD course at Ghent University and am currently writing about *rakugo*. I currently have no concrete plans to pursue an academic career, I started writing merely out of the desire to know more about the topic myself and at the same time enable others to profit from the knowledge I have acquired over the last ten years.

Life after Japanese Studies

A degree focusing on Japan's culture and language does not lead to any one linear way of employment. Many graduates do not employ their language skills past graduation: It is hard to commodify a degree in Japanese Studies. If I count correctly, only five of the approximately fifty classmates with whom I shared Japan-related lectures over the years, today use the Japanese language at their workplace. My former classmates currently work for the BBC, the EU; they sell industrial equipment or insurances, manage restaurants, galleries and families: The fields which Japanese Studies graduates work in are diverse.

Subjectively, it seems that only a small percentage of graduates applies their Japanese skills at work. Soft skills such as analytical reasoning, flexibility, patience, adaptability, creativity and ability to compromise and persuade can – to varying degrees – be acquired at university. Hard skills however are hard to come by. I consider myself very lucky to have received this opportunity and to work in a very stimulating job. I hope to see that future generations see a higher number of graduates apply the skills they acquired in their Japanese Studies lectures.

Many of Japan's companies currently struggle to reach out to markets outside of Japan and actively seek workers from outside the country [日本貿易振興機構, 2019]. Many of the mails I send to clients are carbon copied to names whose bearers presumably come from Korea, India or Spanish-speaking countries. Today, Europeans employed in Japan are no longer only so-called expatriates with high-paying contracts. Citizens of fifteen European countries can apply to work under MOFA's working holiday scheme [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019]. No prior qualification is required [外務省, 2019]. In June 2017 2,072 European citizens used this opportunity to obtain a working holiday visa [独立行政法人統計センター, 2019] and work in restaurants, hotels, shops or offices.

Finding employment

While the opportunities are there, a degree in Japanese Studies is difficult to market on the new graduate job market. After over a decade of working in the private sector, I have seen that employers prefer experts with qualifications over generalists. A Tokyo friend, himself a graduate of a European university's Japanese Studies department, could not attend lectures from other faculties at his alma mater. Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity must be both lived by lecturers and taught to undergraduates. If Japanese Studies wants to ensure

that it is plugged-in, undergraduates must be provided with true learning opportunities.

In the past ten years, I have worked with student interns from Europe and Asia and during my tours, I have been in touch with many undergraduates: my impression is that universities find it difficult to create a curriculum that is vocationally relevant but at the same time also does not to compromise academic quality. HR departments demand more from graduates than profound knowledge and deep understanding of Japanese culture, society and language proficiency and as a result Japanese Studies graduates are very rarely offered internships. Students with MINT degrees equipped with Japanese language skills are far more likely to start internships and eventually gain employment.

A close friend, also a graduate from a European university's Japanese Studies department, currently runs his own company in Tokyo. While he criticizes companies in general for preferring experts in their field who can be trained to have knowledge of Japanese culture and language over experts of Japanese culture and language who can be trained in a new field, he clearly stated that he would not employ a Japanese Studies graduate. The undergraduates and postgraduates he interviewed were generalists with outdated knowledge that was applicable for nothing more than dinner table conversation.

Universities under pressure

While I consider these steps necessary, I also understand that pressure on academic staff is high. Faced with dwindling budgets, they compete for sabbaticals and grants. University management counts the number of their publications and investigates instructional spending per student headcount. Students are interested in the faculty-to-student-ratio and the percentage of students who gained full-time employment within six months after graduation. Japanese Studies looking at Japan just for the sake of learning and writing about Japan is increasingly losing its *raison d'être*. As Japanese Studies departments neither issue patents nor improve processes or increase production rates, it is essential that they communicate the value of their research and find (new) ways to put their work on Japan in the context of global political, cultural and theoretical discourses.

The possibilities of *rakugo*

I am a rare case as somebody who went back into academics, seventeen years after graduation –triggered by myself collaboration with Japanese Studies departments. I felt that *rakugo* had not received enough attention and was offered the opportunity to introduce it to European audiences - both in form of shows and workshops which provided students with the opportunity to improve their speaking and listening comprehension. At the same time, the participating *rakugoka* were stimulated by the knowledge of Japan and Japanese proficiency they encountered travelling the European continent and its islands. The encounters inspired three books [柳家喬太郎, 2019] [春風亭一之輔 キッチン, 2017] [春風亭一之輔 キッチン,

2014], many *makura* (まくら)[2], and a *mandan* (漫談)[3] in which Yanagiya Kyōtarō details his encounters with students at the University of Cambridge [柳家喬太郎, 日本の話芸 E テレ劇場, 2018].

Observing how performers and audiences learned from each other, and how the *rakugoka* interacted with each other, I became interested in the relationship between *shishō* (師匠 master) and *deshi* (弟子 apprentice) as well as the hierarchy in Tokyo's *rakugo* world.

These relations are not a model applied in modern Japanese society, but the fact that there are currently more *rakugoka* than ever in the history of *rakugo* [立川吉笑, 2015, ページ: 6] is significant. In June 2019, the Tokyo Kawaraban, a monthly magazine dedicated to *rakugo, kōdan and rōkyoku*, listed a total of 1049 shows on stages in Greater Tokyo [東京かわら版, 2019]. Research beyond the training inside the community of practices of Tokyo's *rakugo* world and exchanges with academics outside Japanese Studies might open new doors: How did *rakugo* manage to survive? How did the number of *rakugoka* in Tokyo multiply in the last century? How did *rakugoka* turn from discriminated actors to TV superstars? How have other Japanese stage arts found their current positions in modern society?

The Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkōkai (Japan Arts Council) helped the survival of other stage arts by providing schooled training courses for arts on and off the kabuki, noh and bunraku stages [日本芸術文化振興会, 2019]. The goal of these training courses is to create new performers and preserve these arts. Some research has been done on the training school, but mainly painting momentary pictures of the institution or a single one of its courses. A thorough analysis, systematic research of the courses' history and their influence on the arts, comparison with the *yose*-arts and collaboration with global researchers, might provide a model to ensure the survival of arts and crafts in other corners of the world.

Plugging-in Japanese Studies

Generally, rather than for only my own field of research to develop further, I would love for it to develop, expand and evolve *alongside* Japanese Studies. Japanese Studies needs to cooperate and innovate –not only with other academics. Being more plugged-in is essential:
Cooperating with the industry

Globalization offers opportunities for cooperation between industry and universities. Universities can generate ideas for society. Meanwhile, the private sector might provide useful input to Japanese Studies departments. From my own experience, I would like to introduce a simple example of a field where university and industry could join forces:

Japan and Germany pride themselves as global technology players with companies such as Toshiba, Siemens, Hitachi and Bosch leading the way. In 2016, Japan and Germany

[2] improvisational talk before a *rakugo* story
[3] anecdotal *yose* performances

signed the “Hannover Declaration” with the goal to set up a framework to bring forward the Internet of Things and develop industrial products connecting to the IoT [経済産業省, 2019]. Recently, the two countries signed an agreement to bring forward Artificial Intelligence development in both countries [経済産業省, 2019].

After working as a full-time employee interpreter for some years at my current employer, I considered taking the national exam for interpreters in my native country Germany. Examinees can take the exam in seven different categories. With my background in technology, I intended to take the exam in this very category. Despite active technology exchange among companies in both countries, exams for Japanese were not conducted in this category. I imagine that at the time, the *Landesprüfungsämter* (examination offices under the regional Ministries of Culture) did not have connections to experts in the private sector and at universities. Today the exam can be taken in technology only in the Bundesland Hesse (Hessische Lehrkräfteakademie, 2019).

Machine translation has made remarkable progress in the last years. Machine translations of newspaper articles between most European languages cannot be recognized as such. I doubt that human translation for patents, and human interpreting in meetings in joint development projects, will ever become obsolete. By supporting the acquisition of such qualifications, universities can bring forward technological cooperation between Europe and Japan.

Learning opportunities for undergraduates

A collaboration between academia and the private sector on small levels like this could bear highly productive connections. While I have never worked in academia, I have seen a generation of student interns coming to Japan. I consider lecture-style teaching as essential for the transfer of knowledge, but on-the-job training is similarly important to acquire skills and qualification. Vocational training is not something universities can provide, but universities can cooperate with the private sector.

Instead of a year at a Japanese university, students could work in a Japanese company in a field that interests them. If universities cannot recognize internship as credits, a short six-week internship might also be viable. Some European universities specializing in Japanese language in a combination with business administration currently offer this approach to their students, such as the Université Jean Moulin’s “Master LLCER Parcours Langue Culture Entreprise-Japonais” or the Hochschule Bremen’s “Wirtschaftsjapanologie” course.

What are alumni up to?

I understand that one of the main goals of university education is the intellectual development of students. As far as I could find out, no in-depth analysis on the employment of Japanese Studies graduates in Europe has ever been conducted. Firstly, I suggest a pan-

European survey on the employment of former Japanese Studies undergraduates. A first survey could find out whether graduates of Japanese Studies find employment within the first six month of graduation and which industries these positions are in. Regular follow-up surveys could provide information which industries Japanese Studies graduates work in. Not all universities have alumni databases, but with the help of funding these could be created, and graduates could be asked via mail to participate in short surveys via online survey forms.

Reaching out to alumni

Secondly, I suggest the creation of alumni networks. I imagine such a network to initially provide current undergraduates with internship positions during the summer holidays or a semester abroad. I assume that alumni of Japanese Studies are willing to help students from their alma mater. Some of the alumni's companies could provide internships. Depending on their lengths, these are excellent opportunities for students to acquire hard skills such as sales leadership, video production, digital marketing or even software development. I know that I myself - if approached by any of my former or present lecturers or professors, would try hard to find internship positions for current undergraduates.

Former alumni, who have become specialists in their own field, could also be invited for cooperation. The private sector works with specialists out of their own island: consultants might invite an architect into their team to shine a different light on a project with a chocolatier; in a project marketing a new type of microwave, marketing and R&D departments might work together with a playwright in order to gain a different idea on communication. I would like to suggest that academics in Japanese Studies collaborate in a similar way - not only with academics from other disciplines but also with creators who have an outside view of the topic: design thinkers, architects, craftsmen or artists.

Purposely inviting people with an outside view is a chance to create synergies and the above-mentioned alumni network can provide Japanese Studies departments with a precious pool of people to contact for collaboration in conferences: A TV director who produced a documentary on aging Japan. A translator working with Japanese companies exporting their medical equipment to the EEA. A consultant helping European food producers expanding their business in Japan. All these would be interesting additions to panel discussions at conferences when paired up with academics, or valuable lectures at universities.

In such a cooperation, academia profits from the intellectual input and alumni and their companies profit from working with renowned experts.

Innovating students

Lastly, I would like to suggest universities to start internal innovation teams. In the private sector, in order to promote innovation, some companies support employee-led innovation

teams - the same could be done in universities:

Innovation projects proposed and led by students while not as experienced will be less expensive than consultants. A program to promote new ideas increases students' motivation since their ideas are taken seriously and they receive a chance to propose their own idea. The project will also create and strengthen personal networks inside the university and of course will be a welcome addition to the undergraduate's CV.

Participation in this program must be voluntary. Forcing students to participate in simulations, play consultants or create policy strategies over the course of a couple of hours might look good on paper but will not create viable results. This time could be better spent teaching methods or statistics. Innovation cannot be forced; students must apply and participate on their own free will - on top of their course work.

Teams of a maximum of three participants would apply with a project proposal. An expert panel looks into the proposals' viability and the teams chosen would receive weekly classes in what it means to run a start-up and how to make a product viable. Commercialisation departments surely would prefer to drool over marketable patents, but the outcome of the innovation project I envision does not focus on marketability. Innovations can focus on interaction or communication with the public, on improvement of education training or work on the creation of a new course.

Teams are supported by mentors who pass on their expertise and use their connections to bring the project forward and motivate the team. Participants benefit from cross-departmental and cross-hierarchy cooperation. After completion of that crash course, a jury chooses a set number of teams to pitch their ideas. After a public pitch, the jury decides which teams will receive funding to bring forward their project. The winning students are teamed up with experts to realize the project.

From here

Where to go from here is up to all of us: researchers employed at Japanese Studies departments, PhD candidates in the field of Japanese Studies and hopefully also former students.

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