

Issue 15

What is a university?

February 21, 2020

Hello.

This is Kohno Shigeru from Nagasaki University

This is the last email of this series.

In my previous emails, I asked some abstract questions such as “What is learning?” and “What should be taught to students?”

The last question is “What is a university?”

After I graduated from Nagasaki University, I spent most of my career at this university aside from a short period when I worked at another hospital. I had many experiences: difficult times and fun times.

Now I am literally struggling every day to drive the university forward with everyone’s support. Let’s return to the subject of this email, what is a university?

According to some books, the word University comes from the Latin “Universitas,” which means guild, an organized group of students who governed themselves.

At the University of Bologna, back in the medieval times, students gathered together, selected professors, and decided on what they would study in class.

According to records, student dismissed professors that were not popular and even appointed the school president. Universities at that time were autonomous districts.

Today’s universities are completely different.

The phrase “university autonomy” was a normal thing in 1970s when I entered the university and the student movement was very active.

There was a common understanding that maintaining university autonomy was important, although there were many debates among faculty, staff, and students over various issues.

I was able to study independently in a relatively free atmosphere. Looking back, those were the good old days.

Now the word “autonomy” is becoming almost obsolete at universities.

The Japanese sociologist Yoshimi Shunya, the author of the book “What is a university?” wrote that the turning point was in 2001 when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the policy for national universities. This was part of the neoliberal policies implemented by the Koizumi administration.

A set of reforms were called "Toyama Plan," named after Ms. Toyama Atsuko, then Minister of MEXT, encouraged the introduction of the competitive mechanism through consolidation and reorganization, private sector management practices, and third-party evaluation.

In 2004, the national universities, which used to be lower branches of MEXT, became independent legal entities. Universities were forced to operate independently while the operating grants were reduced by 1% every year.

Since a 1% reduction every year is an extremely large number, our university's finances are becoming difficult.

In simple words, the idea of university reform is, “You are free to do anything to survive, but with less funding.” I think most of the university community throughout Japan feel this is not the freedom they expected.

I, like you, have a lot to say to the Government.

I'm sure this is true of any university President.

To return to the question, “What is a university?” In the stormy waves of the society, the definition of "university" is changing and therefore it is extremely difficult to answer this question.

The confusion over the entrance examination reform may have arisen from the ambiguous definition and responsibilities of universities.

Although it is a difficult question, we must keep answering “What is Nagasaki University?” kind of questions found in “Redefining of University Missions,” “Institutional Evaluation and Accreditation,” and “Thorough Discussions with National Universities” from MEXT, the Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation, and other stakeholders.

One of the answers, I think would be, “Nagasaki University, contributing to Planetary Health.”

The crew of “Nagasaki Daigaku Maru” ship must answer the question, "What is Nagasaki University?" from prospective students, parents, local citizens, MEXT, and the people of the nation.

We will soon be in the season when graduating students are leaving and new students are entering.

More than any other time of the year, it may be important to once again ask these questions:  
“What is learning?”  
"What should we teach students?"  
"What is Nagasaki University in the first place?"

I'm waiting to hear from you.

Thank you for reading my email this month.

I received many responses.

I'm grateful for your emails.