



Photo: Author
"Soka Daigaku", Calligraphy by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi

Globalizing Humanistic Education at Soka University (Part 1)

By Mukesh Williams



Author Mukesh Williams

Based on the belief of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) that education should increase human happiness, Soka University helps students to develop the virtues of “beauty, gain and good” for the betterment of self and society. The university envisaged by Makiguchi, planned by his disciple Josei Toda (1900-1958), and built by Daisaku Ikeda in 1971 strives to create a harmonious society and become a “fortress of peace” for all mankind. The concept of “students first”, reiterated by President Hideo Yamamoto, underscores the importance of prioritizing students’ needs, engaging them in dialogue, and developing the virtue of tenacious endeavor. There is a strong belief on the campus that education must not only generate wisdom but also develop character for the benefit of society.

The founding of the university coincided with student unrest in Japan, making it difficult to find faculty staff sympathetic to the ideals of the founder, but this shortcoming was offset by a small well-knit academic community. During this time there were only three faculties, namely economics, law and letters, with less than 1,000 students and 100 faculty members. Kaoru Kinoshita, an English major student in the 1970s and now a professor at the university, recalls the “warm-hearted” welcome he got when he visited the homes of his teachers, ate “home-cooked food” and “freely” discussed different topics. Today the university has over 8,000 students on its rolls. Since the 1980s Soka University has successfully globalized its humanistic education model to other parts of the world such as the United States, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Brazil and South Korea.

Faculty Response to Soka Education

We asked some teachers the following four questions to measure the uniqueness and strength of the university and the challenges it faces in the coming decades:

1. What is unique about Soka University?
2. What do you mean by the slogan “students first”?
3. In what ways is the university international in character?
4. What are the goals and challenges for Soka University in the coming years?

The following are some of the integrated responses from the teachers underscoring the ways Soka education has helped students to develop social and academic skills and given them a global perspective.

Professor Masami Kita, director, Graduate School of Economics

Photo: Author



Every teacher is supposed to respect and appreciate the thinking of the founder. This is our “founding spirit” and it encourages every student and teacher to be brave and realize their dreams. The uniqueness of Soka University is the bond between teacher and student. This has been responsible for our success in various public exams.



Photo: Author

The Central Tower of Soka University

The senior-junior relationship is most important and it shows the respect for the founder’s intentions. In this way we can share each other’s happiness and bravely support our efforts for world peace. Soka University students are like a flower garden where every flower knows its uniqueness. There is no particular order in a flower garden and no hierarchy. There is only one order — how each person can work for the welfare of others. The founder’s idea is therefore quite simple — “Do Good to Others.” There is no necessity to be great but to work for the well-being of others. This has been my attitude for over 40 years at this university. The founder always encourages the university baseball team with these words: “Losing a match does not mean that you are defeated; defeat becomes the driving-force to win the next match. Finally, you must be victorious in life.”

Soka University should become more international and accept more students from overseas. At the same time it should encourage Japanese students to become more international. We should evaluate the greatness of other cultures in the same way as we do ours. Without experiencing life in a foreign land and without communicating with foreigners we cannot appreciate other cultures. When our students go to other countries, get married and have children, their children acquire a truly global perspective. We do have many exchange programs at the graduate school. At the moment there are many overseas students from South Korea, China and Malaysia who are eager to learn the Japanese language and understand the Japanese economy. This inclination will gradually increase the interest of our undergraduates to enroll in foreign universities in Asia and the developing world. After they complete their course abroad they may return for graduate studies here. We have had a successful story with the University of Malaya which has an MBA program. Up to now about six students in all have left for one year to complete this program. It is important that our students acquire international experience and fluency in other languages. In this way they can become fluent in two languages and perhaps work for the United Nations. The university started in 1971, a time when university riots in Japan were taking place. At that time it was rather difficult to find teachers who could work whole-heartedly for the students, but now there are many teachers who are former graduates. They are trying to bridge the gap between the founder's expectations and social reality. Most teachers favor good students but the founder also wants teachers to act as parents and help weaker students achieve success. My attitude is to encourage all students. Some students come to the university to play baseball, not to study diligently. I encourage them too. Recently many graduate students from the baseball team have achieved 98% in their exams. Whatever the general evaluation of the university, students trust the system.

Professor Toshio Okaji, dean, Faculty of Letters

The unique point of Soka University is the motivation students get by interacting with the founder. Most students enter the university to imbibe the founder's spirit, get motivated and develop their personality. As for the educational environment, the most important factor is not just good teachers or good facilities but the presence of comrades and friends. Students can develop their



Photo: Author

personality and get intellectual stimulation through interaction with others. So the student-to-student relationship is perhaps the best aspect of Soka University. Recently we have made a dramatic change in the curriculum of the Faculty of Letters. We have moved from departmental divisions to major systems. Now the students can select many classes based on their goals and aspirations. They can combine sociology, literature, humanities and philosophy to gain broad-based knowledge.

Our three goals highlight the connection between student and society and Japan and the world. These three goals are: to respect the dignity of life, to become world citizens, and to bring people

together. So we should foster real leaders who can promote humanism to make society more humanistic. The founder created the university to connect students with Japanese society at large. We must consider each student as our own child. As our economy slows down we should use scholarships to make students feel more comfortable in pursuing their studies. Soka humanism practiced by our students in society will ultimately change our social system for the better. In the Japanese university system it is invariably teachers first. In Soka University the students are very precious and when we get feedback from them we know what to change. Nearly 40 years ago students were considered not so important but now we have this slogan to bring about the necessary change. Our faculty has been internationalizing at a steady pace to keep up with the demands of globalization. We have dual degree programs with both Chinese and British universities that give our students the opportunity to study at two different universities. Through these programs we help students not only to develop language skills but also to acquire a global viewpoint. Both cross-cultural and multicultural communication will help our students to learn about other cultures, connect academics through language and internationalize Japan. We not only send our students to foreign universities but also invite many foreign students through academic exchange programs to ours. By the time we celebrate our 50th anniversary we would like to be sending 1,000 students to foreign universities each year. In order to realize this target we would like to increase the number of classes delivered in English. We would like to prepare different curricula for foreign students to help them understand Japanese history, culture and society better. Such classes will be delivered in English. Over 100 years ago Okakura Tenshin wrote *The Book of Tea* linking the art of tea with the culture and aesthetics of Japan. Since then there have not been many attempts to let foreigners know about Japanese culture in plain and clear English.

Ryohei Tanaka, director, World Language Center

Many visitors to our campus are quite impressed by the "unified and ready to act" atmosphere for curricula improvement and faculty development. Usually in academia it is hard to get a consensus amongst professors and management. About 10 years ago a smooth consensus was not possible. Now it is possible as many of the graduates from Soka University are already



Photo: Author

working here. Of course, many of our students are not so diligent but some students are smart and hard-working. The university is unique as students do not choose our university because of high score levels or academic reputation but because of the spirit of the founder. We are very lucky to have such students who choose to come to us. They enlighten the place. People who go to famous universities get light from the place. For good students to choose Soka University may not seem such an advantage, but they come to us nonetheless. Such students can shed light on the places they go to. Occasionally some students do not succeed initially but as they continue to make efforts they acquire success. We call this *makeji-damashi-e* or "never to be defeated" spirit.

Many universities are now trying to attract students by making their courses content-based. Our content-based English courses started in 2001, so have a more than 10-year history. Other departments are becoming stronger, such as through the IP program in economics. The literature department has already started Dual Degree programs in English and Chinese. Now Soka University is widening its perspective through a variety of exchange programs. This has been a strong point from the very beginning. In the World Language Center we want to support department-wise English programs such as the Global Citizenship Program in which about 35 freshmen study after class hours.

Professor Yoshimi Teshigawara, Graduate School of Engineering

The area of engineering is changing and will be more science-oriented in the coming years. Students must be more aggressive and innovate. Soka University provides excellent staff for students and they should improve themselves to bring glory to the university. We have about 1,000 students and some of them may like to work on proprietary rights and make useful products



Photo: Author

connected with networks, sensors and devices for the global market. I have been working at the CollabTest developing Web-based training systems which enable students to build quizzes. Usually teachers create quizzes but in this system students make quizzes through online texts. At the Teshi Lab I want the students to become more active in finding safe, unobtrusive and comfortable networks. I have been asking students to work harder for international conferences, do collaborative work and conduct R&D with other foreign labs. This is the best way to internationalize our university.

Professor Kaoru Kinoshita, Department of Humanities

At Soka University, especially at the undergraduate level, there is a close relationship between teacher and student. When I was a student in the 1970s some of my teachers looked over me like a father. Of course, at that time the number of students and teachers was quite small, so we could enjoy a close relationship with teachers, both in class and privately. Now I am teaching at the university and I would like to maintain this tradition. If I can I would like to be a father to them. Once I heard our founder tell some of my colleagues to cherish students more than their children. So the concern for students is the first point. As a teacher I talk with my students about ways to improve the class. I hope my students will develop the habit to think, interpret, and form their own opinions about academic

and non-academic topics. I believe that person-to-person relationships should be the basis of teaching and learning experience. In a mass-type university this sort of environment is hard to develop, but in education I think Socratic debate is indispensable.

In our faculty of letters we have a unique tradition of liberal thinking free from mere utility. Utility is of course important in education. The age of globalization in humanities has set in. We have to recognize the global market and accordingly adapt to it creatively. Today there are different goals that we should pursue but one of them is to realize academic world standards. So we should enroll many foreign students from different countries.



Photo: Author

Associate Professor Bruce Carrick, Department of Humanities



Photo: Author

The students feel very connected to each other. I see that here but not at other universities where I also teach. The campus gives you a feeling of an academic location — a feeling of a Western campus. This was my first feeling as I walked on the campus over 20 years ago. The Japanese teachers' sense of accountability to students is extremely high. Some

faculty members conduct research but by and large most connect with students inside and outside the class. Teachers do their jobs well. The foreign students coming to the seminars offered in English or in Japanese get the benefit of many cultures. Those wishing to study in English have many opportunities in classes. Twenty years ago teaching content-driven classes was not considered suitable for native speakers. Now we are not loaded down by sophomore English. That's something that has been a new direction in the last five years. Prior to this foreign students would not have any opportunity in classes.

I may design my courses with a particular goal in mind but I am more interested in what the students have to say. I flex a lot to accommodate my students to get more from my class. This is a common thing here. There are large numbers of clubs focused on different geographical regions or language groups of the world. Students themselves look out to the world to enlarge their horizon. They write papers about countries of their own choice. There is a

strong student initiative for international connection. This initiative is not top down but bottom up. As a foreign teacher I have been given the freedom to develop my own specialties within the framework of the university curriculum. The direction that I have been able to go I would not have been able to do anywhere else. Each faculty member contributes a unique component to the overall literature program.

Professor Konomi Saito, Department of Economics

Photo: Author



The students are very good. They always think about contributing to others. But the faculty and administrative staff are eager to dedicate themselves to the students. They wish to realize the goals and aims of the university based on the founding spirit. I enjoy being with students who are so dedicated to the idea of working for society. I feel proud of being with them and doing something for them. I graduated from this university and I am just so happy to be with them. Society is changing so fast and not necessarily for the good. Students from Soka have an obligation to make the world a better place. I don't think we are international enough at this point. We have a lot to do to become international in terms of recruiting faculty members and educating students. Our Japanese students have to compete with foreign students. In order to succeed in this competition students must master foreign languages. This is absolutely necessary.

Professor Minoru Koide, director of International Affairs Office

Photo: Author



Students from South Korea and the US refer to Soka culture as being comfortable. They say that Soka University provides them with a very comfortable environment in which to study. They are accustomed to competing with friends. But here the Japanese students are nice and always ready to help them. We call it the "Soka Spirit". My recent experience shows this is unique and we must cherish this culture.

The most distinguished characteristic of Soka University is its internationalization which is found in the variety of international partnerships with different countries in five continents. Today most

Japanese universities are eager to accept Chinese students, but 30 years ago no Japanese university, except Soka University, was willing to do so. In terms of the number of students sent or accepted, Soka University may not be rated as the top university in Japan. But it is the only Japanese university which is sending undergraduate students to a large number of African universities. As the director of the International Affairs Office I receive many guests from abroad. We have two important cards to play while introducing Soka University to others. The first is the founder. If they have an opportunity to meet Dr. Ikeda they immediately understand Soka University. The second card is the student community. If the guests have an opportunity to meet students they can get a good understanding of what Soka University is trying to produce. Recently the founder has had relatively few chances to see guests. Students therefore become the most important asset to globalize our university. The biggest challenge in the future will be how to maintain the attraction of Soka University to students without the founder. Though Soka University is for global peace, global welfare and global citizenship, some people still have a prejudice against it. We have to break this image to get better candidates to give Soka University a competitive edge in society. The population of 18-year-olds is decreasing rapidly and we cannot rely on Soka High School Division forever. In order to create a new image of the university we have to make it more acceptable. Again internationalization has a very important role to play. International students are less prejudiced. They can evaluate the education at Soka University more impartially.

Conclusion

Being a new university, Soka University may lack the historical antecedents of older and more established universities in Japan, but it nonetheless compensates for it by its closely-knit academic community. This human bonding prevents it from turning into one of those highly competitive and individualistic academic campuses of the West. Though seeking academic excellence is an important component of any institute of higher learning, helping others and contributing positively to society are also important values. The departure from cut-throat competition and academic perfectionism makes Soka University quite unique in Japan. Students seeking to build a global community come to the university not only from the Anglo-American world but also from Africa and Asia. To pursue internationalization Soka University has conducted academic exchanges with many universities. It has also created dual degree programs in English and other languages with British and Asian universities to allow students to master non-Japanese languages and cultures. All of this is based on the founding spirit of promoting a humanistic education. **JS**

*Mukesh Williams is professor of Humanities at Soka University, Japan, and visiting faculty at Keio University-SFC. He has published short stories and poems in *The Copperfield Review* and *The Foliate Oak*, and is co-author of *Representing India* (OUP, 2008).*