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Making Sense of Quality Assurance in Japanese Higher Education (0101)

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The focus of this research is a case study of a private university in Tokyo, Japan and the quality assurance accreditation procedure conducted by the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA). By utilizing Ericson's (2001) conceptual framework of four ideal types of meaning, and Weick's (2005) concept of sensemaking as a lens through which to examine change, the research explores how faculty members make sense of change and accreditation procedures. It asks: how far does this particular instance correspond to, or otherwise illuminate, Ericson's (2001) conceptual framework for understanding change? Through participant observations, twelve in-depth research interviews, and extensive document analysis over two years, the research examines what happened to faculty members in a university undergoing change.

Higher education institutions are rich in socially-constructed meaning, and so, during change, some faculty members share values, rules of behaviour, and norms that become stabilized in institutional structures. This is due to the establishment of a common understanding. Conversely, there can be differences between groups in the institution, such that shared understanding can be difficult to attain. The JUAA procedure continually asks, 'do the constituent members [of the institution] thoroughly share understanding?' This research shows that in this case, there was limited shared understanding and limited collective sensemaking.

This case highlights significant issues with the decision-making processes and managerial structures of an HE institution, highlighting the way in which that institution follows many private sector management practices. The case university was deemed not change-capable (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008). The faculty members saw accreditation as a duty and showed limited understanding of the purpose of quality assurance procedures. At times, they were at odds with their

professional identity; experienced erosions of trust; showed a lack of collegiality; a lack of informedness and a heterogeneous cognitive profile.

This research contributes to our understanding of change, higher education institutions in Japan and accreditation, acknowledging the importance of effective leadership in HE institutions undergoing quality assurance procedures. It also provides an interesting insight into the Japanese higher education industry and Japanese culture.

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