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Critically evaluating university mission and vision statements

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to better understand the nature of mission and vision statements issued by universities and whether these statements reflect the values of the institution's leaders, faculties, and students. The researchers, being employed as professors in a Japanese science university, sought to analyze their own institution's mission statement using open, axial, and selective (OAS) coding as an evaluation methodology. The themes that emerged were those of the great man, elite education, and alumni exclusivity. The overarching theme of the mission statement was elite serving the elite. Although presented as a mission statement, the prominence of the theme of a visionary man suggests this document stylistically adheres as much to the characteristics of a vision statement as it does to a mission statement. This paper may assist teachers in deriving meaning from their institution's mission or vision statements, and critically assessing whether the institution's mission or vision comports with the beliefs, standards, and educational philosophies evidenced by their institution in practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The primary theme of this paper is the gap between the purpose and praxis of university mission and vision statements. This paper takes an interpretive approach to determine whether university mission and/or vision statements reflect their institution's values as well as the beliefs and practices of teachers and university stakeholders. The objective of this paper is to spark critical reflection among educators regarding the importance, practical application, and authenticity of mission and vision statements produced by higher education institutions.

Mission and vision statements offer stakeholders a glimpse at an institution's stated beliefs, philosophies, and views for the future. We felt our institution's published statement could offer some insight into the system of our institution, and that our process for carrying out this analysis could serve as an example for others interested in examining the mission statements of their own institutions. During discussions with colleagues, many reported they had not read the mission statement. They also felt it did not apply to their practice. This drew into question how well the mission statement spoke to faculty members' needs and whether the mission statement was, in fact, composed with that intent. Perry and Richardson [1] suggest that systems that achieve their expressed goals are not broken. These systems are designed perfectly to get the results they produce. Accordingly, we problematized the question of who mission statements are written for and for what purpose they are written. We postulated two possible reasons why teachers are uninformed about the institution's mission statements: i) they feel it does not reflect the actual goals of the institution; serving only as window dressing; and/or ii) even if they feel it does reflect the institution's true intent, the member of staff does not feel it is relevant to their practice.

As a first step to better understand the goals of this institution and whether they are relevant to our practice, we first employed open, axial, and selective (OAS) coding [2], [3] to the university's stated mission. The purpose of this coding was to examine how the mission addressed some questions we had regarding its view of students, teachers, leadership, and educational approaches. This coding helped to better understand how the school views its stakeholders. We felt that analyzing the mission statement could potentially better connect us with the stated goals of the institution. The questions used to inform our coding were as: i) how are students/teachers regarded?; ii) how is leadership viewed?; and iii) how is educational practice viewed?

We organize this paper into the following five parts: literature review, methods, findings, results, and discussion. It is our hope that this paper will catalyze further reflection regarding the content and wording of university mission statements. Analyzing mission statements is an important first step for developing strategies for positive change as it reflects how the company and people see themselves [4]–[7]. It also gives the reader a glimpse at the institution's strategic intent for the future [8]. This critical reflection is an important step in the responsible research and innovation model for positive change, which involves 3 steps of co-creation, reflection, and transformation [5]. This includes not only self-reflection, but also reflection of the institution's current climate and intent for the future. Encouraging reflection in stakeholders is a crucial step for innovation in institutional practices [9].

The goals of this paper are to: i) analyze the intentions and implications of institutional statements; providing some historical content regarding their origins and evolution; ii) to apply OAS coding [2], [3] to the statement produced by our institution of employment for the purpose of analyzing emerging themes regarding educational philosophies, leadership practices, student treatment and core values; iii) to analyze, through discussions with colleagues, whether there is alignment between the views expressed in the document and actual teacher practices; iv) to compare our university's statement with statements produced by other higher education institutions in Japan; and v) to inspire readers of this paper to engage in critical reflection of their own institution's mission and/or vision statements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mission statements, which derive their name from Catholic missions where these types of statements of purpose first appeared [10] over time bifurcated into religious and military models. As this happened, certain qualities became emphasized in the former and the others in the latter. It is too simplistic to ascribe the characteristics of academic missions to religious origins and the characteristics of business missions to military ones. There is no hard line between the two. It may be noted that religious mission statements have tended to focus on inspirational aspects [11]. However, the distinction is further complicated by the existence of the more recently introduced vision statement, which both religious institutions and many businesses have developed. Through this historical perspective we aim to prepare the reader for the discussion on their characteristics that follows.

Mission statements and vision statements overlap in some areas, but they are also different in important ways. Perhaps the greatest defining characteristic of a vision statement is that, unlike mission statements, a vision statement defines and strongly emphasizes an end state that members of the organization have agreed upon as desirable [12]. Moreover, vision statements, which became common in the 1990s [13] tend to be more emotive and inspirational [14] than mission statements which tend towards a flatter tone and a presentation of purpose, strategy, values and policies [15]. Therefore, in approaching mission statements critically, one of the first questions that should be asked is: is the mission statement actually a mission statement; or is it a vision statement; or is it a combination of both? In this way, we lay a foundation for critical examination of the ways in which many mission statements embody characteristics of both mission statements and vision statements, thereby challenging simplistic associations and highlighting underlying contradictions.

An example of one important difference between vision statements and mission statements is the centrality of the visionary personality. An aspect of a vision statement, which is not as central to mission statements, is the idea of leadership and/or a leader endowed with vision and an ability to communicate that vision effectively to those in the organization [14]. It is not only a theme found in religious sources. The idea of a charismatic leader is also very much a part of the ethos of what is commonly accepted as good business practice. That said, within business-related sources, the root of the idea can be found in religious frameworks, e.g., Protestant writings, Calvinism of the 18th century, business-related tracts of the 19th century, and Carnegie in the 20th century. In these writings, not only do virtuous business practices lead to success; success is evidence of right action of an inspired leader [16]. It is also a theme we have already seen replayed this century in certain political figures who have emerged from the business sector as well as in the rise of the Prosperity Gospel movement. These themes are common in both the religious, military and business threads of the mission statement tradition. One uniting component is the trope of "the great man" [16]–[19] or the charismatic individual, nearly always an alpha male, who provides a vision for the way forward. What we seek to accomplish here is to forefront the distinction between mission and vision statements, particularly in

terms of emphasis on end states. This comparison adds clarity to the understanding of these two types of statements and sets the stage for the later analysis of institutional mission statements.

Still, another point to consider is: who is the intended audience? Mission statements can be inwardly directed toward members of the organization and/or stakeholders; or can be outwardly directed, towards prospective customers or participants [20]. The former are often categorized as socially oriented and the latter more service oriented. A mission statement is typically expected to speak to the needs and concerns of stakeholders [21]. For this reason, mission statements of the former category tend to presume a certain degree of insider knowledge regarding policy and management. To those involved with the university as a business, strategies for further stability, growth, and long-term relevance in the marketplace are emphasized. As for the latter, students looking to enter university and their parents who are likely paying the tuition, educational philosophy is emphasized. To the casual drop-in, as well as alumni and donors, the message may be one of what the university is doing to address the needs of society [21]. By raising the issue of audience in mission statements, and distinguishing between inwardly and outwardly directed statements, it can be better seen how mission statements are directed to different stakeholders, or potential stakeholders, with varying emphases on policy, management, educational philosophy, or societal impact.

Several researchers have applied data-driven approaches to researching the core values of mission statements [22]–[26]. By identifying the most commonly appearing words, coding those to the core values discussed, and then determining which word of secondary frequency the first are paired with, it is possible to make well-supported inferences about a given institution's priorities. For example, Breznik and Law [21] determine that universities tend to emphasize research (which is associated with strategic values) over teaching (which is aligned with service and educational philosophy). By applying such methods to institutional mission statements, a view can be developed regarding whether the statement is a mission statement; or if it attempts to be all things at the cost of coherence. Is the statement a 'hodge-podge' [27] as Ellis and Miller find many mission statements to be, and a 'vague paper tiger' [28], as in previous study [27] too blurred in its focus to effectively communicate a clear message. This methodological aspect contributes a practical dimension to the review, showing how researchers can assess the content of mission statements to gain insights into institutional priorities. Moreover, is a mission statement a genuine announcement of the institution's actual values; or, to take a more cynical view, mere window dressing for casual passers-by? Certainly, the vaguer the language used, and the less clarity present in the statement, the more difficult it is to achieve the stated goals in a meaningful way, and the easier it is for those institutions to claim to have reached those vaguely stated goals. To this point, in a data-driven thematic analysis of university mission statements, find that, as a result of the increases in university enrollment and the 'massification of higher education', the language of university mission statements has become 'broad', 'unwieldy', and 'unfocused' [27].

Cortés-Sánchez [28] identifies three phases of theory on mission statements, namely "seminal", "mainstream", and "critical". Accordingly, one important step when analyzing mission statements is considering when it was written, and which of these three phases it belongs. This to some degree indicates the theoretical underpinnings of a given mission statement's current composition. It can also point to directions in which the mission statement writers should move in order to keep pace with other organizations. The seminal period, which seems to run roughly from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, is one in which, as mentioned earlier, the statement amounts mainly to a private conversation, the existence of which the general public may be unaware. During this seminal period, King and Cleland [29] put forth models of mission statements which are entirely internal to the organization and hardly consider the function of the mission statement in public communication.

"Mainstream" phase began in the 1980s [28]. During this time, organizations began to consider how mission statements could act as marketing tools. However, as late as 1991, Campbell and Yeung [30] continue to focus predominantly on the ways management and employees relate. By the early 2000s, theory about the proper function and utility of mission statements was undergoing a change in which the idea that communications should take customer perception into much greater account began to take hold [31]. By the late 2000s, this idea had gained some traction with Peyrefitte and David [32] focusing on the potential for mission statements to help organizations achieve business-related yields. Later, Devasagayam *et al.* [33] write about the ability of mission statements to satisfy customers' interests and concerns. David *et al.* [34] identify a trend away from mission statements that act as discourse between management and employee. They note a shift towards mission statements directed more towards customers and other external stakeholders than towards internal issues. Likewise, even in academia, market forces will play a role in the composition of mission statements [35]. Accordingly, in the university this equates to mission statements which less resemble exchanges solely between administration and faculty and more communication from the university to prospective students and the family members or other tuition providers. Recently, Provost and Kohnen [36] write of how one university's originally humanistically-toned mission statement was purposely rewritten in a conscious effort to align itself with the forces of neoliberalism which was on the ascent.

The three stages in the advancement of mission statement awareness do not always neatly abut, but overlap significantly, perhaps due to differences in the timelines of various regions. Thus, as early as the mid-1990s, a more critical examination of mission statements began in some regions. Organizations and researchers began to question how truthful mission statements were in their expressions and declarations. The period also includes studies on how effective mission statements really are in terms of effecting organization's performance for its stakeholders [28]. In the last decade, increasingly, studies have also been conducted on the content of university mission statements. One issue, relevant to this study, is that of sameness with and distinctiveness from other organizations. On balance, universities tend to strive for sameness [37], [38]. Specifically, private universities, however, tend to behave more like private organizations than organizations coming under control of governmental policy. In these cases, expressions in mission statements of differentiation from other universities are more pronounced. They also more frequently engage in self-mention and references to students [28].

Relevant to the topic of university mission statements is the work of researcher Dweck, author of mindset [39]. Dweck identifies two mindsets based on "fixed" and "growth" models of learning. The fixed model corresponds to deeply ingrained notions of the born genius, or the idea of natural talent. Growth models, by contrast, see ability as being developed through motivated effort fostered by supportive persons and institutions. Another researcher, Murphy [40], author of cultures of growth conducted a large-scale study of the Fortune 500 company mission statements. She found that a preponderance of mission statements advances a fixed mindset model of talent, skill, and ability. The goal expressed in these mission statements is to find and recruit individuals with innate ability. This theme was found much more commonly than themes associated with a growth mindset, such as self-discovery and nurturing development [40].

This review of the existing literature enables a more contextualized discussion of mission statements within a broader historical and theoretical framework. It sets the stage for the subsequent analysis of specific institutions' mission statements in their given contexts. A more exhaustive review should be the topic of a future paper.

3. METHOD

This study used qualitative analysis through OAS coding [41]. The purpose of employing OAS was to better understand themes within a university mission statement. OAS coding was used to better understand underlying themes, values, and priorities of the researchers' university. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using grounded theory methods [42], specifically OAS coding. OAS coding was chosen for its effectiveness in uncovering patterns and themes within written texts. This afforded the researchers deeper interpretive analysis. In the first coding iteration, open coding was employed. This step involved highlighting sentences to identify the meaning within the document. This process helped generate a list of codes representing the most salient themes of the document. Data from the mission statement was broken down into meaningful units to facilitate subsequent analysis. Following open coding, selective coding was utilized to explore the relationships between identified concepts and themes within the text. This involved categorizing themes and concepts in the document into broader themes based on their similarities, allowing the researchers to better understand overarching themes. Finally, selective coding was employed to distill themes into a final coherent interpretive framework. In this step, the researchers aimed to identify core themes and values central to the university's mission. Through iterative analysis, the researchers identified key concepts and narratives in the mission statement document, essentially creating a snapshot of the institution's underlying values and goals, as expressed in their statement.

Ethical considerations were scrupulously observed during the research process [43]. All data pertaining to mission statements was collected from sources available to the general public. Neither individuals' nor organizations' identities were disclosed. Any content that might be deemed sensitive was anonymized to maintain the privacy of persons, groups and organizations from which the information discussed during this study was collected.

4. FINDINGS

While it may be argued that the university's system, mission, and handbook are heavily influenced by Japanese cultural norms, these norms are not ubiquitous among Japanese higher education institutions. As mission statement reform appears to be global trend now, mission statements in Japan should be viewed in terms of where they lie along this developing timeline. To better understand our institution's goals, we employed open coding of the mission statement to identify themes regarding leadership. The themes, coded in light blue as "great men", are described in the document as Noblesse Oblige. Fiddick *et al*. [44] describe the concept of Noblesse Oblige as "a social norm that obligates those of higher status to be generous in their dealings with those of lower status." Indeed, the mission document corroborates this definition by describing

the spirit of Noblesse Oblige as "a sense of duty as people undertaking a pioneering discipline, i.e., as those who were endowed with ability, they had the conviction to take the initiative to fulfill this challenging job." As mentioned, this inclusion of a great man or visionary figure may suggest this statement is more a vision statement rather than a mission statement.

When describing the institution's visionary man, the document states "there, he spoke of his emotions from his time as a gifted youth at the school in his hometown when he had to temporarily bring his studies to an end because of the death of his father." This description suggests the sacrifice of a great and "gifted" male of significant import, rather than an ordinary contributing member of the community. This comports with the suggestion that visionaries are not made, but rather are born "great men" [45], [46]. With regard to the mission's depiction of students, it seems that the onus of success is placed solely on the students rather than the teachers and/or leaders. Consider the following excerpt regarding the institution's historical view (Section 5) of students:

> "*While enhancing education, it was also essential to be strict about promotion and graduation, including the formation of a barrier system. As a result, in some school years, there were no graduates, to the point that there was a Failure Shrine on campus where students would go to pray to avoid failing.*"

It seems, from this, that leadership is exonerated with respect to student failure. If a student failed, the system filtered them out through the barrier system. There is no mention of motivating students, student-support resources, or developing their innate ability. There is also no mention of failures on the part of the institution or teachers who taught them.

4.1. Leadership alignment with the mission

To better understand if the Noblesse Oblige [44] concept was adhered to by members of this institution's staff, we informally asked three colleagues (two professors, and a department head) about the mission. All three members intimated to me that they had never heard the term "Noblesse Oblige" and it was suggested that perhaps this concept was only window dressing or as Barktus and Glassman question "smoke and mirrors" [47], and not important to the institution's actual practices. Regarding the existence of a barrier system that is adhered to in practice, the handbook suggests a quota system regarding grade allotment:

> "*In order to avoid unfair discrepancies in grading between teachers of the same course, the university policy is to limit S grades (100 to 90) and A grades (89 to 80) to 50% of your students in each class. You will be formally contacted and asked to justify your grades if 80% (or more) of your students receive an S.*"

It does seem, from this, that, as with Perry and Richardson [1], a system is intentionally enforced to prevent too many students from achieving high scores in classes. The idea of being "formally contacted and asked to justify" grades may be an issue of concern for some teachers, perhaps impacting how they grade their students.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Applying OAS coding [2], [3], three central themes arose: great men, elite education, and student exclusivity. The running theme throughout the document could be characterized as "The elites serving the elite." The only way of competing with the subsidized public sector is selling an elite signal to a restricted sample of the student pool. Essentially, the document espouses a belief that its leaders are great people, and the students are exclusive and innately gifted. We will provide some examples of these themes in this section of the paper. The theme of "great men", or visionaries, presented itself in the passages: i) it is no exaggeration to say that the foresight of these young men (the founders) is what led to the foundations of Japan as a nation of science and technology; ii) (…) those who were endowed with ability, they had the conviction to take the initiative to fulfill this challenging job; iii) against this zeitgeist, they (the founders) looked toward a future in which the popularization of science would be the basis of Japan's independence as a nation; iv) there, he (the founder) spoke of his emotions from his time as a gifted youth; v) the spirit of Noblesse Oblige; and vi) Furnished with (…) correct ethical values.

The theme of "elite education" can be found in the passages: i) receiving elite-level education; and ii) the educational principle of our university is "achieving excellence". The theme of "student exclusivity" presents itself in the passages: i) Educating people who observe natural and social phenomena with a scientific eye, perceive unseen principles and realities; ii) The mission (…) is to educate people who have the ability; iii) Only those who were capable would graduate; iv) (…) essential to be strict about promotion and

graduation, including the formation of a "barrier system." As a result, in some school years, there were no graduates, to the point that there was a "failure shrine" on campus where students would go to pray to avoid failing; and v) Having the ability for co-creation.

As a result of coding [2], [3] and critical analysis of the document, we determined that the underlying message or running theme of the document was "elites serving elites". This idea of presenting the concept of elites serving elites is understandable when you consider what Bergh and Fink [48] suggest regarding the matter: "the only way of competing with the subsidized public sector is selling an elite signal to a restricted sample of the student pool." Essentially, the document conjured an image of great men teaching great men. This maps neatly Dweck's fixed model of learning [39] found to be so prevalent in Murphy's study [40] with individuals who are "endowed with ability" or simply "have the ability". We conclude that this document presents an image of extraordinary leaders teaching similarly innately gifted extraordinary future leaders.

In the first section of this paper, we mentioned the Deming theoretical notion [1] that systems are, themselves not broken, but efficiently produce the result for which they are designed. In the body of this paper, we have suggested that the institution's mission statement and handbook are designed in a way that promotes social stratification with leaders perceived as noble, and students as being in a fortunate position to gain assistance from great people. We also have outlined an ongoing progression in the theory of mission statements, both globally and within Japan, where studies on this topic remain scant. Examining mission statements through OAS coding [41] can help to reveal the theoretical underpinnings of a mission statement's current composition. It can also point to directions in which the mission statement writers should move in order to keep pace with other organizations [36]. Moreover, this analysis can point to ways in which we may expect universities to adapt their mission statements in terms of more humanistic styles of self-representation in the face of enormous worldwide historical trends [35].

The OAS coding performed on the mission statement indicates a progression past the phase of internal dialogue between administration and faculty as seen in Campbell and Yeung [30]. There seems to be an awareness of the potential for using communication to the public as a marketing tool [31], [32]. Nevertheless, it remains in a phase where repeated self-mention [28] is acceptable and very little text is used to speak directly to any perceived customer concerns [33]. This contrasts strongly with two other Japanese universities, Tokyo Denki University (TDU) and Temple University Japan (TUJ). An excerpt from the mission statements of TDU reads:

> "*Through its solid and diligent academic culture, TDU has been fostering students for more than a century with the mission, "Development of Human Resources Who Contribute to Society by Technology." TDU also has been providing quality instruction based on the two educational maxims: "respect for practical study" and "students first"*" [49].

Here the concerns and interests [35] are addressed directly in an attractive manner designed to make a large number of prospective students and their parents feel reassured that their interests will be protected. TUJ also states that they make the student a primary focus:

> "*Through innovative teaching, exceptional care, and rewarding opportunities in a multicultural setting, we equip students to thrive in an interconnected world. TUJ prioritizes students and strives to provide them with the tools to imagine, explore, and succeed in an ever-changing global workplace*" [50].

Again, we see a mission statement in which addressing the public in a way that eases concerns is a central focus of the mission statement itself. In this case, we also can detect an attempt to demonstrate that the university is also taking into account the forces of neoliberalism [38].

6. CONCLUSION

University mission statements ideally form a reference point for faculty to posit themselves and occasionally engage in course correction. This can have important implications for faculty, students, and the institution itself. For teachers who feel the student should be the primary focus of an institution, perhaps these statements better match their own personal philosophy and educational practice. Certainly, they reflect the trends based on theories which place students and other stakeholders more central to the foci of mission statements. Because a mission statement may affect how an institution is perceived by the public and by stakeholders both internal and external to the organization, we believe that faculty members should read their institutions' mission statements and critically evaluate whether it connects with their own personal beliefs and teaching practices. Those responsible for maintaining up-to-date mission statements should: i) consider the evolving theories of mission statements (and the role of vision) and should keep in mind the

purposes and potential effectiveness of mission statements; ii) take note of the broad and historical trends influencing these theories and consider how they should best respond to them; and iii) identify the mindset models that their institution's mission statement aligns with and consider whether, moving forward, they wish to espouse a fixed or growth mindset. Doing so would potentially create opportunities and support for students who otherwise would not receive such assistance, make teaching a more enriching and dynamic experience for faculty, and make the university more attractive to a greater number of prospective students.

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