

Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0 – Volume 21

~ Dialogue with university students ~

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Several universities in Sydney have invited me to give lectures to university students or to engage in discussions with them. Recently, I gave a one-hour lecture at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). I also attended and gave the keynote address at the presentation ceremony for the Australia-Japan Society of NSW (AJS-NSW)'s University Awards, which recognises outstanding students in Japanese studies at universities in NSW.



Usually at such lectures for students, the content focuses on current Japan-Australia relations and introduces Japan's foreign policy, but in addition to these topics, I conclude my remarks with several messages that I want to personally convey to students. When I was working in Japan, I had many opportunities to give lectures and talks at universities, and this was the approach I developed then.

For the UNSW lecture, I ended my remarks with the following message to students.

Firstly, an outgoing mindset. It is important to be engaged with the world beyond your immediate environment. I was born and raised in Koichi Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, and I chose to pursue my university education in Tokyo, so that I could meet new people and discover new things. Then, seeking to have these new experiences in a global context, I chose a career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I think mentally I always had an outward-looking or outgoing mindset. Meeting new people brings new knowledge and it is stimulating. Debating with others and experiencing “contests between different ways of thinking” are the seeds of growth. To keep your antenna switched on to world events and your intellectual curiosity set at ‘high’, to increase your own knowledge and communication skills, and to polish your own sense of self – I think the importance of having this mindset is the same wherever you are in the world, and it is all the more important to cultivate this mindset while you are young.

Secondly, additionality. It is important that you are always thinking about the added value that you can bring to something.

If a boss or team-leader simply sets staff the goal of achieving 100% of a task and expects the staff to contribute 100% to achieve that target, then the team-leader has no reason to exist. Instead, the team-leader should be thinking if “our excellent staff achieve 100% of our target, what can I add to that so that we can achieve 120%?” If there are time constraints, the same staff might only be able to achieve 50% of the target. The team-leader should refine the process and establish that as the pass mark, then staff can move on to the next step and in this way undertake more tasks in the same time. Thinking in this way, the team-leader can add value to staff results and maximise overall organisational output when time and personnel are limited. I would like people to become aware of the importance of “additionality” when they are at university.

By the way, I have heard it said that an individual’s ability to add value – in other words, an individual’s competitiveness – changes with age. According to this theory, how we measure our competitiveness varies as the decades progress: in our teens, it is our ability to memorise; in our twenties, our knowledge; in our thirties, our skills and expertise; in our forties, our personality (being a nice person); in our fifties, our boldness and decisiveness; and in sixties, our health.

Thirdly, accountability. In other words, the importance of being “open”. It is vital that you are aware of the need to be confident that you can stand by any of your own actions and be accountable for them as you move forward through life. It is also important to protect yourself. It is important to act responsibly, mindful that all events that happen around you and how you act or react to them can be made public.

So, above are the three points I touched on at UNSW. It’s not my intention to preach at the younger generation or force my ideas on them. I introduce those ideas because I believe that there is a commonality that means they apply not only in Japan but also in Australia and other places around the world, and also because I hope they might be in some way useful to developing future leaders. How my messages may be taken on board, or not, is up to each student, and that is fine by me.

I look forward to more opportunities for dialogue with students and the younger generation.

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