Tsukuba University

Turmoil over treatment of foreign staff

Tokyo

INTERNATIONALIZATION is a word very much in vogue in Japan; whether it refers to the yen and money markets or to the emergence of a new kind of Japanese who is equally at ease drinking cocktails in New York or *saki* in Tokyo. Internationalization of university education too is also much talked of. But recent events at Tsukuba University suggest that there is some rough going ahead.

It is claimed that four foreigners at the university, who have lost their jobs, have been shamefully discriminated against by university authorities. One of them, a Korean national, Professor Dong-jin Kang, has taken the ultimate step of suing the university. The first major court hearing will take place next week but a final verdict is not expected for two years.

Paradoxically, the problems experienced by the four foreigners — a West German, a Taiwanese, a Korean and an American — stem from changes in the law enacted in 1982 which finally made it possible for foreigners to be employed as tenured staff at state universities. Taking advantage of the new law Tsukuba University decided to give tenure to some foreigners. But it was also decided that henceforth no foreigner without tenure — that is thirty or so foreigners on contracts renewed each year — could stay for more than four years. Foreigners who had already been there longer than that were thus in effect dismissed. But four of them — all with exceptional academic records — were, they believe, repeatedly assured by senior university staff that they were to be given full tenure when their one-year contracts expired. They were told not to look for work elsewhere. But when the contracts ran out they did not receive the expected job nor a letter of explanation, simply a form of application for severance pay that signalled that they were now unemployed.

Among the four foreigners Professor Kang appears to have received the most frequent and definite assurances of continued employment. He now sits in his office — which he occupies only because of his success in gaining an injunction to prevent the university throwing him out — looking angrily through the many pages of detailed notes he took of the promises given at interviews with senior university staff. Why, he asks, for what purpose, was he so cruelly deceived? His academic reputation is considerable — he has published 15 books and more than a hundred articles — and he would have been able to find work elsewhere if given honest warning. He is a very angry man. Previously he

had “never thought of anything but his own academic work”, but now he is determined to fight, because, as he puts it “as a human being I cannot permit people to take my hand, shake it and lie to me”. The reference is to a meeting he had just a few weeks before he lost his job at which he claims two of the university’s five vice-presidents promised that all was well.

Professor Margarete Sawada — a West German with a Japanese husband — tells a similar tale. Other members of staff corroborate much of what she and Professor Kang say. And that both professors’ names are on this year’s lecture schedule suggests that many thought their continued presence certain. Professor Sawada is now unemployed, but is not taking legal action.

The president of the university, Professor Nobiyuki Fukuda, a distinguished physicist who spent some years in the United States, and a fluent English speaker well known for his international views sees recent events differently. He is not himself directly responsible for appointments: indeed, the Tsukuba constitution specifically prevents him from being so. He plainly regards it as extremely strange that any foreigners should have felt assured of permanent employment. He explains that a new post can only be created after a specialist committee has shown the need for a new post; candidates have to be interviewed before a selection committee can do its work. And even at that late stage all is not certain — if the budget does not come through then the appointment may still be cancelled. The president is adamant that Professor Kang’s appointment has never been discussed at a relevant university meeting he has attended. “Powerful professors may have given affirmative responses” to Kang’s enquiries, he says, but that just means he had “supporters but not a job”.

Has there then been a simple misunderstanding? Many university staff, foreign and Japanese, think not. Professor Fukuda’s term of office at Tsukuba is nearly over and soon elections will be held for a successor. It is a common view that it is the proximity of this election that accounts for recent events. The university has a reputation for in-fighting, perhaps because its progressive new constitution did away with the “chair” and “faculty” system and thus removed some of the time-honoured ways of dealing with disputes. Some feel that the allocation of university posts has now become too important a weapon in university power struggles for mere foreigners to be any longer considered for them. One vice-president who supported

the view that foreigners fit for full-time posts should get them and who had fought for tenure for the foreigners was fired from his post as vice-president.

Foreign lecturers also point to other discouraging events. Some who were once told they were to be treated in “just the same way as Japanese” find they are no longer welcome at council meetings, even as non-voting observers, nor are they now permitted officially to be responsible for supervising the thesis work of final year students. And another vice-president was recently reported as saying that “foreigners should not teach something a Japanese could teach and that long-term employment should only be bestowed on foreigners who are Nobel prize candidates”. Small wonder then that many foreign teachers are wondering whether they really count for much at Tsukuba.

The rule limiting employment to four years is seen as particularly repressive. Its justification is that it is better to have a large number of different teachers than a few who stay a long time. But if that is true why not insist all staff — Japanese and foreign alike — are replaced every four years? Clearly the policy would be disastrous. The rule only makes sense to someone who sees foreigners as different species from the Japanese; not to be treated as equal and responsible members of the university staff.

The rule also ignores the emergence of a quite new breed of foreign teacher. Not so long ago many foreign teachers in Japan had no intention of remaining for any length of time. But now graduates with a particular academic interest in Japan’s language and culture, plus an ability to speak Japanese and as often as not a Japanese spouse, are common. These people are willing to give the commitment that a good university needs.

It is a pity that the atmosphere at Tsukuba should have been soured in this way for it is by far the most international of the state universities. Five per cent of its students are foreign, there are more than thirty foreign lecturers on short-term contracts and many facilities are specially designed to make it easy for foreigners to come and study. Nothing like this has been achieved anywhere else and there is much to be proud of. To Professor Fukuda, the view that Tsukuba is becoming more parochial and xenophobic is “non-sense”. And he firmly proclaims that “internationalization” is Tsukuba’s greatest goal. But curiously just as the news of goings on at Tsukuba began to reach the press, an article appeared proudly stating how Prince Hiro, the Emperor’s grandson, who has spent two years doing research at Oxford University, has been treated “just like anyone else” during his stay. If that seems close to the true meaning of “internationalization” then some further thought is needed about the direction Tsukuba University is taking.

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