

From Resistance to Resolution: The Journey Towards a Sustainable Vision of Continuing Education in Japan

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OVERVIEW

Even before 2011's 9.1-magnitude earthquake and the devastating 15-meter tsunami that followed, Japan had been struggling with tremendous economic and demographic challenges that had forced significant changes to its tertiary education sector. In particular, these challenges had played a crucial role in the development of Japanese continuing education. Accordingly, this article will begin with an explanation of the cultural, economic, and demographic contexts in which Japan-style continuing education evolved, followed by a discussion of the present situation and possibilities for the future.

First, some clarification: one of the many obstacles to fruitful discussion of the state of continuing education in Japan involves translation. Part of the difficulty arises from the expanding definition of the term in English (e.g., the discussion in Field 2006, Jarvis 2004, Knapper & Cropley 2000). Do we mean credit and noncredit courses taken at colleges and universities, company-sponsored training, vocational courses taken at a for-profit

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trade school, or swimming classes at the local YMCA? Or are we referring to “lifelong learning,” which potentially includes K–12 education as well?

A Japanese answer to all the above questions would be simply, and confusingly, “Yes.” Traditionally, *shakai kyôiku* (literally “social education”) and *shôgai gakushû* (literally “lifelong study”) are the terms most used to render “continuing education” into Japanese, but both have limitations. Gordon (1998, 2-3) offers the following definitions: *Shakai kyôiku* refers to “organized educational activities (including those for physical education and recreation) for adults and young people **other than** those provided in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools or at institutions of higher education” (emphasis mine), while *shôgai gakushû* “encompasses learning that takes place at **all** stage of life and **includes both** formal learning at school or other places and non-formal learning” (emphasis mine). Japan’s Ministry of Education (MEXT) has advised that *shôgai gakushû* represents the more accurate translation of “continuing education” as used in the United States (MEXT 1980). However, for the purpose of this article, I will more narrowly interpret “continuing education” to mean credit and noncredit courses that Japanese universities (including two-year colleges) offer to adult (25+) nontraditional students.

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS

In 2006, under my direction as dean, Miyazaki International College began offering night classes for a new continuing education program—the first such program in the prefecture and one of the few in Japan. The novelty (in 2009, only 14 percent of Japan’s universities offered similar classes—see, MEXT 2010a) of such a program helped contribute to the flurry of media coverage (domestic and international) that followed. The program itself was successful from the start, with consistently high levels of enrollment for all classes. However, this “success” needs to be viewed in the context of its limited scope (e.g., noncredit courses only) and the very low initial expectations. Both the college president and the board of trustees had at first strongly opposed the program, believing that offering night classes for nontraditional students was a “violation” of the university’s mandate as an educational institution. Furthermore, they were concerned that allowing adult students on campus would lead invariably to incidents of “harassment” targeting the traditional students attending regular classes. This administrative resistance was only overcome by such expedencies as including wording in all advertisements that adult students would not

be allowed on campus before 6:30 p.m. so as to avoid their mixing with regular students. Furthermore, all continuing education students were to be required to check in at the first-floor administrative office before proceeding to their classroom.

Ironically, the reasons for their concerns and my reasons for starting the program arose from a common source. Since the Meiji era, Japanese universities (including two-year *tandai* institutions) have traditionally recruited and admitted only recent high-school graduates. As recently as 2008, traditional students made up 98.3 percent of the incoming university student population in Japan, with almost all of these students starting school full-time on April 1 (MEXT 2009a, 1; 2010b). The overwhelming majority would then graduate four years later in March, to begin their post-university working careers on April 1 of that same year. Before 1972, there were no alternatives to this scenario in place—i.e., no domestic options existed for adult students wishing to return to university to retrain and/or receive a first degree (MEXT 2004a, 2010b). Moreover, for some years after 1972, universities continued to lack the flexibility to meet the needs of this population. Options such as fall enrollment, part-time enrollment, evening classes, low-residency programs, and alternative (e.g., correspondence programs, televised classes) class formats—all crucial to attracting nontraditional students—had yet to be approved by MEXT (2010b).

Furthermore, while policy changes (delineated below) since 1972 have theoretically given universities the flexibility to offer nontraditional students a broad range of options, lagging cultural acceptance has kept the number of universities providing such services and student numbers down. In 1998, Gordon observed the following:

Universities in general provide few opportunities for adults to participate in higher education. The university student population is highly stratified by age, and it is rare for students outside ages 18 to 22 to attend university classes (12).

In support, he pointed to MEXT statistics showing that only 4,189 adult students were admitted to traditional (i.e., non-correspondence) undergraduate degree programs in 1995, and 4,889 to graduate degree programs (out of 801,217 and 87,359 students, respectively). And yes, as noted above, recent data demonstrate that in some ways the situation remains unchanged compared to the average (21 percent) among OECD countries

(including 23.8 percent in the US). Nontraditional students consistently make up less than 2 percent of the undergraduate university population in Japan (MEXT 2010b).

Still, Gordon's observations oversimplify an extremely complex issue. Beginning in 1972, MEXT (2010b) instituted a broad range of policy changes that specifically targeted adult learners, including recognizing correspondence degree programs (in 1972), allowing nontraditional students to enter universities as regular students (in 1989), allowing evening classes to be offered for credit as part of a graduate program (masters programs in 1989, doctoral programs in 1993), and allowing lunchtime and evening classes to be offered for undergraduate credit courses (in 1993). By 1995, more than 70 percent of Japan's universities had incorporated at least some of these changes into their admissions policies and curricula (MEXT, 2001). In other words, even during the period of Gordon's study, most Japanese universities attempted to accommodate adult learners. However, he is right that very few adult students were taking advantage of these opportunities.

One reason for the lack of participation is suggested in the nature of Gordon's observations themselves—a lack of awareness among the target population (and even among researchers and educators) that such opportunities existed. This ignorance is understandable since outside of the public *Housou Daigaku* (University of the Air)—which has aggressively (and successfully) pursued students since its beginning in 1985—attempts by universities to advertise these opportunities have begun only in recent years. Related to and compounding the effects of the limited public outreach was university unwillingness to include several key changes in their reforms, particularly the failure nationwide to offer night/weekend classes (only 43 four-year universities offered them in 2000, out of 622) and/or institute adult education programs with curriculum content specifically targeting the needs of adult learners (MEXT, 2001). In other words, while universities had been careful to follow the letter of the MEXT mandates and lift those policies that absolutely prevented their admission and attendance, almost nothing had been done either to attract adult learners to these schools or to ensure their retention.

A partial explanation for this can be found in an examination of employer attitudes towards both continuing education and adult learners. For example, a recent MEXT survey found that only 6 percent of company employees had taken university classes or received on-campus training after

beginning employment. Of those workers who were also college graduates, 49 percent expressed interest in returning to university at some point either for retraining or for graduate studies. However, 43 percent of the companies surveyed said that as a general rule, this would not be allowed (MEXT 2010b). As Cutts (1997), Gordon (1998), McVeigh (2002) and Yoshimura & Anderson (1997) also discuss, these employer attitudes underline a key cultural difference between the United States and Japan: Japan's tertiary sector has traditionally ceded the role of providing continuing education to employers, with almost all employee retraining (including certification courses) provided either onsite at the company or at company-specified (and contracted) locations. More importantly, retraining is not limited to supplementing the knowledge and skill set garnered in formal school settings, but intended to replace both. Indeed, while student entrance to and successful graduation from university are considered important in that they demonstrate an ability to learn, the substance of what students learn while attending university has not traditionally been valued; after all, they will learn the important stuff after hire.

As Yoshimura & Anderson also note (18-19), nothing demonstrates this more than the Japanese company preference, regardless of industry, for hiring college graduates with an extensive record of participation in extracurricular club activities, particularly physical-education majors and /or those who played sports while in school. Employer preference for these so-called *taiiku kaikei* students has been well documented in yearly nationwide employer surveys conducted by the major Japanese newspapers. *Asahi Shinbun* (2011) found that the preference continues, with company respondents citing the greater "teachability," "endurance," and superior "teamwork skills" of these students—not to mention their supposedly deeply ingrained "respect for superiors"—as their main reasons. Prospective employers see them as more trainable and more willing and able to acclimate to the particular needs and unique culture of the company in question, giving them a competitive advantage over majors in that field/industry.

However, the single most important contributory factor in the slow growth experienced in the adult-education sector is the surprising (considering its image in the West) disinterest Japanese have traditionally shown towards continuing formal education at the tertiary level—attitudes that have changed only relatively recently. In 1960, less than 30 percent of the 18-year old high school population applied to university (MEXT, 2007a). In 1969, the number of university entrants still made up less than 30 percent

of the 18-year old population, with less than 40 percent of the applicable population applying. (The percentage of 18-year olds applying to university—including 2- and 4-year institutions—would begin to top 50 percent only in the mid 1970s.) More importantly, according to a 1967 nationwide government survey, and assuming both opportunity and the financial wherewithal, only 51 percent of families stated that they would like their sons to attend university, and only 14 percent felt their daughters should attend (Chuo Kyouiku, 1981). In a follow-up survey conducted in 1976, these percentages had risen only slightly, to 56 percent and 24 percent, respectively.

MEXT notes that these latter attitudes were in keeping with the economic emphases (mainly agriculture, traditional craftwork and low-tech manufacturing) in Japan at the time. Because the quality of the educational foundation received through high school was comparatively high, specialized instruction and training were considered necessary for and received by only a relatively small portion of the population (Chuo Kyouiku 1981, MEXT, 2004a, 2008b, 2008c). As a result, and particularly with regards to female students, much of the Japanese population deemed a university degree unnecessary or even elitist as Mori (2002) suggests. Mori further points out that due to “the exclusionary nature of the entrance examinations, Japanese universities have had to consider the learning needs only of very high academically achieving students” (p. 28)—again underlining the traditional separation between the perceived esoteric nature of university education (to be received only by a gifted minority) and the practical training (mostly onsite at one’s employer) received by the majority.

Accordingly, Gordon is not incorrect to observe that “the majority of Japanese society continues to distinguish between two distinct stages in life: the learning stage prior to early adulthood and the working stage” after either high school or university graduation (14). In combination, the separate phenomena discussed above help explain the lingering negative stereotype of adult students in Japan, limiting their abilities to utilize any certificates or degrees earned. For the reasons articulated above, individuals of working age who continue to attend school are looked at with, at best, some suspicion. Until 1972 students typically entered college/university at the age of 18, with their first semester starting in April of that year. The sole exceptions, called *ronin* in Japanese, were students who had failed the entrance examinations for their desired universities, forcing them to take an additional year or more off for test preparation. Assuming improvement

in their test scores, these individuals would typically enter university the following year, though with the stigma of having initially failed the examinations and necessitating a graduation date one year older than normal. Similarly, concerns about “stigma” and its potentially negative impact on the post-graduation job search are behind the intense pressure Japanese university educators receive from both school administration and MEXT to ensure that all students graduate in four years. And as Cutts (1997) and Ono (2004) also suggest, the potential impact on new graduates of such a “stigma” is relative—very dependent on both school ranking and major. For instance, graduates of the top universities—Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Keio University, and Waseda University—typically fare well regardless. Finally, one must keep in mind that despite being made illegal in 2007 (Kousei, 2007), age discrimination in hiring continues in Japan; job advertisements listing desired age ranges and/or age limits (usually 30 or under) can still occasionally be found even for academic positions.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

However, economic and demographic (since the 1980s) trends have forced first MEXT, and later the universities themselves to reconsider both the importance of continuing education in modern Japanese society and the tertiary sector’s role in providing it. MEXT (2004a, 2008b, 2008c) describes in detail how discussion of continuing education as a concept occurred for the first time in Japan towards the end of 1965, as a direct reaction to events overseas—specifically, the recommendations emanating from the UNESCO-sponsored “International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education.” Section 18 is the most pertinent:

In the contemporary situation, **with scientific and technological advances; with social, economic and political changes taking place with ever increasing rapidity; with** greater social and civic responsibilities being placed upon the average adult citizen; with democratization of cultural life; with a growing problem of leisure arising in country after country as a result of scientific development in industry and agriculture; with the breakdown of old traditions and long established customs; with the large-scale movements of populations from rural to urban communities, from region to region and from country to country; **with the ever-rising flood of new knowledge resulting from**

research, the need for a new concept of education became more urgent than ever. In addition, terminal formal education, characteristic of traditional schools and colleges, was no longer adequate to provide adults with a stock of knowledge sufficient to assist them to meet the new problems facing them, to adjust to the new changes taking place, or to help them to understand and control the new forces at work in society. (Emphasis mine.)

The Japanese government felt the bold sections to be extremely relevant to Japan's situation. At the time, the domestic focus was on low-tech manufacturing and agriculture, but rapid economic growth fueled government and industry ambitions to expand into other areas. However, a major hurdle was the lack of specialized training and education in the general populace.

MEXT's initial response included a series of changes to the approval procedures (all new universities in Japan must first apply for recognition with MEXT in order to operate) for new universities, including streamlining the application process and greatly easing the acceptance criteria (MEXT, 2010b). The majority of these changes were instituted between 1970 and 2003, with the number of universities almost doubling (382 to 702) during this period. Furthermore, a broad number of policy changes (listed above) specifically targeted the needs of adult learners, enabling universities—in theory—to design and institute retraining (including certification) programs catering to the needs of these students.

Still, the economic, industry-driven issues pale before demographic factors, with MEXT's decision to encourage and streamline the new university application process ironically playing a major role. Between 1950 and 1990, Japan's population increased almost 50 percent, from 83 million to 123 million. Rapid economic growth experienced over the same period combined with policy changes enabling easier university creation (especially private) led to an explosive expansion of new institutions. In 1949, the number of four-year universities and students stood at 178 universities and 130,000 respectively; these increased to 507 and 2.2 million by 1990. More importantly, despite the decreasing birth rate (and, from 1991, a corresponding decrease in overall student numbers), the number of Japanese four-year universities has actually continued to increase: 756 in 2007 and 773 currently (Mulvey, Winskowski & Comer, 2011).

The decreasing high-school student numbers have had a huge impact on Japanese universities. In 1990, total high-school student numbers peaked

at 5.6 million; by 2009, the number of high school students had dropped to 3.4 million, a decrease of over 40 percent. One result, as Mori (2002) and Mulvey (2001, 2010) also observe, is that Japan's traditional university feeder programs have reached the point where they can no longer graduate a sufficient number of students to maintain the economic vitality of the majority of Japan's universities. In 2006, 47.1 percent of Japan's private universities (266 schools total) reported that they failed to meet their recruitment goals (*Nihon Shiritsu* 2006, 23). While data for 2011 have not yet been published, multiple researchers (listed in Mulvey, 2001, 2010) have predicted that the total number of student applicants in 2011 will have almost exactly equaled the minimum student numbers Japanese universities (including 2-year colleges) need to admit to break even. The result is that particularly in the case of two-year and many regional 4-year institutions, competition for student enrollment has taken a desperate turn, with the rejection of any student admission applications increasingly having a direct economic impact.

Particularly disturbing given its causal role in the current situation, MEXT has also begun financially penalizing universities with low student-enrollment numbers (MEXT, 2009c). Traditionally, even private universities received yearly government funding amounting to a varying, but often significant, percentage of their yearly revenue. However, beginning in 2007, MEXT instituted a policy where universities admitting less than 70 percent of capacity will have their yearly funding cut by 15 percent. Universities at under 60 percent of capacity lose 50 percent of their government funding. Keep in mind that in 2009, 163 universities (out of 773 total) both failed to meet their recruitment goals and reported seeing no improvement over the last year (MEXT 2010c, 5). In other words, with 18-year population numbers decreasing yearly and facing potentially devastating cuts in governmental funding as well, Japan's universities have strong financial incentives to overcome cultural resistance factors by accepting nontraditional students.

CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE TRENDS

Though dated and (as noted above) at times inaccurate, Gordon's discussion of continuing education in Japan provides a detailed and helpful snapshot in English of the state of the sector in 1998. Unfortunately, an additional flaw in his essay is his attribution of blame. While correctly noting that Japanese universities "have been very inaccessible to adults, both for degree programs and even for taking individual classes apart from a degree program" (12), he holds MEXT's "centralized bureaucratic direction and

control of lifelong learning” as responsible for the situation (13). Specifically, Gordon asserts that they do “not appear to be vigorously taking leadership to quickly make significant changes to the existing system,” and concludes that “much more needs to be done to provide opportunities for university study to adults” (13).

However, as discussed above, most of the changes Gordon advocates had been enacted by MEXT long before 1998, with the sole exception—credit transfer between universities and programs—addressed in reforms published in 1999. In other words, MEXT took action, with the only thing preventing successful implementation of the new policies being the universities themselves. Indeed, university unwillingness to implement key reforms (e.g., the addition of night classes) and promote the opportunities that were available underline the severe limits of MEXT’s actual authority vis-à-vis the nation’s universities. As Mori (2009) and Mulvey, Winskowski & Comer (2011) discuss at some length, the oft-asserted “strong control” MEXT held over university operations—to the extent this was ever true—traditionally referred at most only to a small subset—less than 10 percent—of Japan’s 4-year institutions, chiefly the national (*kokuritsu*) institutions. Accordingly, before policy changes (particularly the national university privatization law and the new accreditation requirements) instituted over the last decade, MEXT has had little ability to enforce its mandates, especially with regards to curriculum and student-admission issues.

Still, the university resistance to adult education is especially surprising given the changing public attitudes towards not only continuing education but also the role of tertiary institutions in providing it. By 1981, clear majorities felt that universities should increase the number of public lectures offered and that adults—male and female—should be allowed access to education (MEXT, 1981). Over 65 percent felt that lacking access to education led to lower status and less income potential. Of those in favor of university-provided continuing education, one-third said they would take such classes to increase knowledge levels and acquire new skills directly related to either work or domestic life. Fully half felt that it would become a source of rejuvenation, an opportunity to find and pursue potentially life-changing (*ikigai ni naru*) interests outside of work and/or the home. Additionally, 25 percent also felt that access to such classes would improve their quality of life after retirement. Finally, between 1976 and 1985, various government initiatives had tripled the number of people taking continuing education classes. However, universities played little role in this initial

increase; community centers, newspaper and broadcasting companies, and department stores offered most of these courses (MEXT, 1987).

The situation is improving, albeit slowly. While not exclusively continuing education in the strictest sense, Japanese universities have increasingly offered correspondence degree programs. Eleven were initially created in 1972, all at private institutions, with a little over 98,000 full- and part-time students attending (out of 1.5 million university students). The number of provider schools and average student numbers continued almost unchanged until 1985. Then with the establishment that year of the public *Housou Daigaku* (University of the Air) followed by new policies standardizing and simplifying the procedures for correspondence course recognition (in 1991) and clarifying the use of alternate mediums (video, online, etc.) for providing classes (in 1998), student numbers began a slow increase through 2005 (MEXT, 2009c). As of 2009, in addition to *Housou Daigaku*, 52 private universities offer degrees through correspondence to a total student population topping 250,000 yearly. About 90 percent of these students are over 25 and about half report that they are currently employed. Women (58 percent) outnumber men at the undergraduate level, but this percentage is almost exactly reversed in graduate school. Over 75 percent of these students are in the Humanities/Social Sciences, with sociology and education the most popular majors (MEXT 2009c, 10). However, *Housou Daigaku* students consistently make up almost one-third of the total number of correspondence students in Japan (Housou, 2011).

Of more direct impact on university-level continuing education was the *Sai Charenji* (“Re-challenge”) initiative of 2006. As conceived by MEXT (2006a, 2006b), it encouraged universities to take a leadership role in providing job retraining to those in mid-career as well as critical thinking, living, and study skills to adult learners of all stages and walks of life. Specific skills listed included IT, accounting, and foreign languages. This training was seen as a second chance for adult students as well as an opportunity for universities to help “create a more flexible and diverse society.” Twenty-five billion yen (almost \$300 million US) was allocated to participating universities in support of these noncredit continuing education offerings. By 2007, 211 universities had started continuing education programs as a result, including my own (MEXT, 2007b).

Unfortunately, no nationwide survey was ever conducted to ascertain either the total student numbers or the demographic profile of the adult students participating in these programs. As government funding for this

initiative was discontinued after 2009, no such study is likely forthcoming. However, I can speak with some authority to our experience at Miyazaki International College (MICI), a small, 4-year liberal arts institution. Located in Kiyotake Town, a relatively rural community outside of Miyazaki City (itself one of Japan's smaller cities) in Kyushu, MIC had struggled in recent years with student recruitment, with less than 700 full-time students typically attending. Given these difficulties, in addition to the concerns listed above, there was some worry about whether any students would sign up for courses in a continuing education program even with extensive advertising, night classes, and a curriculum designed with the needs of adult students in mind. One result of this concern was our preemptive capping of class enrollments at 20. In other words, by mandating small classes, we hoped to be able to pass off any embarrassingly low student-enrollment numbers as the result of administrative choice—i.e., us rejecting them.

Our concerns were unfounded. The program itself consisted of multiple (2-3) evening class offerings made each semester. All classes invariably exceeded the cap (and sometimes room capacity)—with the added result that said enrollment cap was soon abolished. Indeed, due to the program's success, a decision was made to continue despite the cancellation of the government program that partially inspired it. As for demographics, as of 2009, 59 percent of our students were retirees (over 65), 40 percent between the ages of 22 and 60; and 1 percent either still in high school or a full-time student at another university. Of those students employed, "government" and "education" were most consistently listed as occupations.

In retrospect, there were three keys to our success. First, we offered classes based on our estimation of adult-student needs, including general English classes (attracting a broad range of students), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) classes targeting currently employed adult learners (a number of Japanese companies tie promotion to employee TOEIC scores), and teaching-methods courses (including the use of new educational technologies) for area high-school and junior-high-school teachers. Second, we offered these classes at night and on weekends, enabling the targeted student population to attend. Third, we did a lot of advertising.

A large number of other universities, chiefly in the more cosmopolitan Kansai and Kanto regions, appear to have been successful as well, with advertising for "Re-challenge" classes continuing even without financial support from MEXT. It would seem that public interest in continuing-education classes offered by Japanese universities is at a sustainably high

level in many areas, with the potential for growth. Indeed, MEXT (2004b, 2005, 2010b, 2011a, etc.) has repeatedly argued that particularly given Japan's aging population, expansion into adult education and/or continuing education will be one way to ensure university survival through the difficult years ahead.

Of course, the various disasters—both natural and manmade—that struck Japan in 2011 will have a powerful impact on continuing education as well. In addition to the widespread devastation and loss of life, tens of thousands of people continue to be displaced, with both their homes and their places of work destroyed, and (especially in the case of those from Fukushima) ongoing radiation concerns that may prevent rebuilding, possibly forever. MEXT (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) has stated repeatedly that universities should take the lead in retraining of this population, preparing them through continuing-education classes for new careers. However, as MEXT (Chuo Kyouiku, 2011) itself also notes, budget issues, coupled with an unstable leadership situation at the highest levels of the Japanese government, have so far precluded concrete government initiatives and/or financial assistance for those universities wanting to help. Accordingly, while institutions in the affected areas are making piecemeal efforts (including free public lectures and intensive summer courses offered at my current university), it remains to be seen whether and how much government support these efforts will receive. And without this support, given the difficult economic climate, not to mention the ongoing challenges faced by the institutions themselves, it may prove difficult to continue these offerings over the long term.

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