

Implications of the Declining Japanese Population on University Admissions and Curriculum

journal or publication title	The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies
number	30
page range	345-350
year	2018-03
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00001485/

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Abstract

The impact of the population decline in Japan has been well documented over the last decade and has focused greatly on the economic ramifications of this unprecedented phenomenon (Clark, Ogawa, Kondo & Matsukura, 2010). However, within Japanese university circles there is an equally troublesome worry that is, in part, tied to these same aforementioned financial worries, which is the rapidly declining student population (Kazuyoshi, 2017). The challenge amongst these schools is the ability to maintain a student body population that is sufficient enough to viably sustain the costs of running an academic-institution. In order to achieve these sustainable numbers, administrators must grapple with how to attract and retain a dwindling number of prospective students in a country where most universities were established in era that had an overabundance of college aged children.

Population Decline Background

According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2016), the number of live births numbered at approximately 981,000 in 2016. This marked the first time the numbers have been less than one million in Japan since the 1920's. The causes of this steady decline has ranged from couples putting off having children in order to focus more on their own careers, to an aversion towards marriage altogether

among young people (Clark, Ogawa, Kondo, Matsukura, 2010). Whatever the reason may be, the solutions seem to be clearer cut: either the government can increase the incentives for having children, which many prefectures have already enacted through child subsidies, or relax the immigration policy to help bolster the workforce. With the latter, other countries with this similar problem, such as Germany and France, have found some success in terms of maintaining their economic stability on the backs of foreign labor (Steinmann & Ulrich, 2013). However, the Japanese government has shown a certain level of reluctance in following suit with these western countries (Chung, 2010) and this, directly or indirectly, resulted in its first contraction of the population since the 1920s (Soble, 2016). Although these two solutions would go a long way in solving the workforce problem, they would not immediately address the shortage of potential students attending universities. Though encouraging couples to have more children would certainly help the country in the long-run, a sudden increase of live births in Japan would likely take multiple decades for the effects to be truly felt, and would not readily resolve the large problem in the foreseeable future.

Admissions

According to Kazuyoshi (2017), the number of university students is projected to plummet to 480,000 in 2031, a near 25% drop from 650,000 in 2018. The brunt of the decline in college-aged children will be felt unequally among all the universities across Japan. Top-tier schools, will most likely be left relatively unscathed, due to their ability to attract students solely based on their reputation alone. With fewer people to compete against for admission, fringe students, who would have normally been overlooked by these elite schools 20 years ago, will now find it easier to gain admission. This, in turn, will result in a domino effect of sorts in that the less elite universities may face the reality that the quality of applicants may not be the same as in year's past. This will

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have to necessitate major structural changes in order to not only recruit students, but also retain them students for the entire duration of their undergraduate life.

Administrators have no easy choices in addressing these changes. On the one hand, they could decide to keep the admission standards high, but decrease the number of acceptances a year. This would result in a decreased student body population, leading to lost tuition revenue, and then create a difficult-decision to reduce the number of staff and faculty. It is the assumption that virtually all universities would choose to avoid this first option at all cost. On the other hand, if universities wish to maintain the same level of students as in years past, there is no real other alternative but to relax the standards of admission. Less stringent standards will likely allow schools to maintain the same financial resources required to run an academic institution in the form of annual tuition and application fees.

Curriculum

Changing the admission standards would most certainly necessitate the way current curriculums are developed. Assuming lowered admission criteria, students may be less prepared for the rigors of traditional academic programs and may lack some of the basic study skills required to pass classes at the post-secondary level. This will necessitate more academic support for more students who find their classes too difficult or challenging. Thus, resources will have to be allocated to more facilities and staff that can offer a way to help learners pass their courses. This kind of support is just one way in which Japanese universities can survive in the long run. By showing students that they are dedicated to their progression as intellectual adults, institutions can start bolstering their reputation.

One criticism may be the so-called ‘dummying-down’ of the university curriculum. However, there should still be standards for graduation, albeit revised ones. It is

essential for administrators and faculty to come to a consensus on learner outcomes and how to quantifiably measure them. It is also important to make these standards as transparent as possible to all students at an early stage to make sure expectations for them are clearly set. Moreover, in terms of the courses themselves, a greater number of remedial classes would need to be introduced, with an option to place out of these classes if their placement exam scores were sufficient enough. Students who may lack certain academic or study skills entering their freshman year may have to complete more credits for graduation, but ideally will have the same skill set as their peers at the end of four years. It would be a steeper climb for those taking remedial classes, but if they can see a quantifiable gain in their study skills it will lead to greater student satisfaction and ultimately in improved university reputation.

Conclusion

The rapid decrease in population is a major socioeconomic worry in Japan and the solutions to this problem are complex. From the increasing costs of taking care of an increasingly aging elderly population, to China overtaking Japan as the second largest GDP in the world in 2010, there are many reasons to be concerned about the nation's economic future (Dickie, 2011). While the responsibility to address these concerns ultimately lies with the decisions of the Japanese governmental policymakers, universities can take their own course of action in protecting the future of their institutions. Lowering admission standards will help prop up the number of students and keep up a steady revenue stream. However, this alone is only part of the equation, as a wider umbrella for admissions will equate to more learners who may not be prepared for secondary education. This can be rectified with an introduction of additional remedial classes and more academic support from the university. Although the criteria for admissions may be less rigorous, the ones for graduation should remain

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intact. Students may find that they would need to take more classes to fulfill the requirements for graduating, but ultimately would come away with the same high quality education as their peers.

Although this may seem on the surface as just a way for academic institutions to endure the overall population decline, it is also in the best interest for the country as a whole. These universities have decades, and even centuries, of history in Japan and contain a vast array of experience and knowledge accumulated over the ages. Their achievements stretch to the arts, sciences and humanities, and their contributions have had a lasting impact on the world. In order to preserve this essential part of Japanese culture, action must be taken soon to ensure the survival of Japanese universities, no matter how bleak the outlook is for the number of college-aged students in the nation.

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