

DIRECTIONS AND DEMANDS OF UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION IN JAPAN: THE CASE OF TOKUSHIMA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper briefly presents trends in university continuing education in Japan, focusing on a case of Tokushima University, a member of the National University Corporations in Japan. The research is mainly based on questionnaire surveys that were conducted over the last three years to adult learners who had been taking courses at the Center for University Extension within Tokushima University in Japan. It is revealed that the main target of Japanese university continuing education is confined to elderly people who have been retired and tend to be wealthy without having any financial problems, and that their intentions to come to this kind of university extension center are mostly non-vocational, such as to enrich their knowledge, to expand their hobbies, to meet people and find friends etc, while few people have interests in taking exams for certain certificates or qualifications after taking their courses.

Introduction to the Issue

The movement of university extension has a long history in the world, especially in Western Europe; however, it was late in arriving in Japan. Yet, this does not mean that the idea of providing learning opportunities for local communities through higher education did not exist previously in Japan. The role of providing learning opportunities for local non-elite adults was played by temples, shrines, and special schools in the old days, and after the Second World War it was a service provided by public halls, libraries, and lifelong learning centres organised by local educational authorities under the so-called 'social education' system. Therefore, although 'the idea of lifelong learning itself was first introduced to Japan in the 1960s' [Miura, Matsushita, Nakamura & Suezaki 1992:31] in response to proposals by UNESCO, relevant activities had already existed throughout the post-war period and the provision of lifelong learning has been expanded by each of the local governments, along with the nation's initiative to expand provision which was taken forward during different periods.

Meanwhile, the idea of extending university began to be discussed in the 1970s, resulting in the establishment of a university extension centre which provided extension courses to local adult learners. The number of the universities which opened these courses remained small until the late 1980s, whilst the provision of lifelong learning by the private sector began to prevail during this period. It was in the 1990s that a number of universities began open courses for their local communities, following the nation's propulsive movement to promote lifelong learning with the enacting of a Law on the Promotion of Lifelong Learning in 1990 and the publication of increasing numbers of relevant policy reports. A large number of universities followed suit, mainly by establishing forms of lifelong learning centres within their universities in order to provide extension courses for local residents, using the universities' human and physical resources.

This paper briefly illustrates current directions and demands of university continuing education/UCE in Japan, focusing on the case of Tokushima University, where the author works both as a practitioner and a researcher in this field. It points out some present features of UCE referring to the case of Tokushima University, and referring to the outcomes of questionnaire surveys which were conducted over the last three years.

Emergence of University Continuing Education in Japan and its Background

In order to illustrate the current situation of UCE, an outline of Japanese universities must be given. Japanese higher education/HE differs quite considerably, depending on the constitutional type (national, local, or private) and on the nature of the institutions (general universities, single-subject based universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology, and special training schools). Though

Japanese universities emerged in the late 19th century, the participation rate in HE rapidly increased with the growth of higher education institutions/HEIs in the post-war period. Consequently, the nation suddenly became a country with mass HE provision. For instance, the level of participation of full-time equivalent students in HEIs was nearly 76.3% across Japan in 2007 [RIHE 2010]. This is also supported by the fact that more than 95% of the age cohort between 15 and 18 go through upper-secondary education [OECD 2010].

In terms of numbers, there were 756 university institutions (national 87, local 89, private 580), 434 junior colleges (national 2, local 34, private 398), 64 colleges of technology (national 55, local 6, private 3) and 2995 special training schools (national 11, local 202, private 2782) in Japan as of 2007 [Research Institute for Higher Education 2010]. In fact, these institutions are diverse in their backgrounds, sizes, and mission statements. Although the current system of Japan's HE has been largely influenced by the United States since the Second World War, the nature of the sector is not identical throughout. As the above numbers of HEIs show, Japan's HE sector is composed of a 'mass private sector' and a 'restricted public sector'. Generally speaking, Japan's large-scale scientific research is mostly conducted in national universities alongside private companies' research institutes, not in private ones.

Until quite recently, undergraduates mainly comprised school leavers studying full-time. In the 1970s some pioneer universities inaugurated their provision of extension courses to local residents in order to support social education activities conducted by local education authorities and national universities which had started. These included Kagawa University, Tohoku University, and Kanazawa University [National Association for University Extension Centres 1997]. The number slightly increased in the 1980s to include Takaoka Junior College and Tokushima University. However, until the late 1980s, their main activities remained practical, i.e. providing extension courses to local adults only. It has been since the 1990s that most universities have realized the importance of their role in contributing to the local community by providing open courses and opening their on-site facilities to local residents, while at the same time promoting academic research into UCE more systematically through their practices. These trends were supported by worldwide trends in promoting a 'learning society', together with globalisation and informatisation, as well as the central government's massive promotion of lifelong learning among Japanese universities with financial aid, resulting in a sharp rise in the number of universities providing open courses. There were no unified rules among all universities and therefore actual practices were left to the discretion of each of the universities, depending on the individual case, which resulted in the co-existence of various types of operation. Their general activities include research into lifelong learning, co-ordinating university extension courses, providing information and counselling on lifelong learning in local communities, networking among all the different stakeholders in this field, training internal academic staff for this purpose, training adult educators who are employed by local governments, supporting local lifelong learning opportunities both directly and indirectly, and managing collaborative activities between the university and the local community and so forth [National Association for University Extension Centres 1997:6-7].

In April 1996, the Committee for Lifelong Learning which was established within the central government in 1990 presented a report which stressed the need of HEIs to respond to the promotion of lifelong learning by opening their doors more flexibly by various means. Specifically, it proposed the recruitment of more mature students, as well as opening university buildings and sites to local communities, including libraries, museums, sports centres, grounds etc, whilst listening to opinions and calling for assistance from outside the university more actively, such as involving more volunteers from local communities in university operation. Along with these government-led trends in lifelong learning, a number of universities started providing lifelong learning opportunities through extension courses from the 1990s. Those days were a period of transition but more than half of the universities (53.7%) had established a sort of lifelong learning centre by the end of the 1990s.

The stress on promoting lifelong learning at the university level prompted various discussions among different stakeholders, as follows. Firstly, it raised the issue of how to increase awareness among university staff, as most still regarded HEIs as being for fresh young people. Secondly, the focus of discussions was on how to distinguish UCE from general continuing education in terms of the contents, course duration, and accreditations etc, making the best use of the 'university' itself. Thirdly, some referred to the possibility of achieving 'a Japanese style of UCE', in consideration of its current features, i.e. most adult students are over 50, are retired, and tend to take university extension courses merely for the purpose of pursuing their own interests and concerns and to pass on tradition and their cultural values to the next generation; they do not take the courses with vocational intentions [Research Committee for University Extension 2000:25]. Fourthly, there has been an increasing demand among the general public for high-quality extension courses, and some concerns have been expressed on how to respond to these needs appropriately, making the right use of the human and physical resources of universities [National Association for University Extension Centres 1997:1]. Fifthly, a prime concern, particularly among private universities which have started to suffer from a shortage of young students, is how to cope with the ageing society and low birth-rate. They have addressed this issue by supplementing the main body of students by mature people in order to stabilise their financial management [Group for the Research Project on the Promotion of University Continuing Education 2000:2]. Thus, over the last two decades, most universities were prompted to include extension courses within their provisions. As a result, 95.9% of all the universities (684 institutions among 752 institutions) offered various kinds of extension courses in 2008, whereas in 1992 that the figure was 76.3% of all the Japanese universities (399 institutions among 523 institutions) [MEXT 2010a].

However, despite these strengthening and deliberate considerations of its appropriateness, actual practices of UCE have still tended to remain 'sub (extra) task' in most universities [National Association for University Extension Centres 1997:6]. Furthermore, in spite of these initiatives, the situation of UCE is far less advanced than in most other industrialised countries. According to recent statistics [OECD 2007], the proportion of mature students aged over 25 in Japanese HEIs is only 1.8%, while the average rate among OECD countries is 21.3%. Nowadays, it can be said that, facing the serious concerns of rapid aging and the sharp decline of the 18-year old population derived from the very low birthrate, a prime concern is how Japanese HEIs can modify their old-fashioned role of just improving the environment of teaching young students, and readjust themselves to become a core of lifelong learning in local communities.

In short, although the government addresses 'the realization of a lifelong learning society in which people can freely choose learning opportunities and learn at any time during their lives, and receive proper recognition for their learning achievements' [MEXT 2010b], there is still a long way to go to achieve this goal, and the target of UCE is still confined to a small proportion of recipients. This can be partly attributed to the fact that it is companies themselves which have been taking the role of training their workers within their own systems, and therefore the policy of lifelong learning has not developed together with the labour market system [Group for the Research Project on the Promotion of University Continuing Education 2001]. As a result, current labour policies are not flexible enough to meet the needs of workers aged between 20 and 50 who might wish to take the opportunity to learn at certain stages of their working lives. At the same time, universities have not been properly prepared to accept adult students of those ages, for example, by offering child-care services and/or career development guidance. In consequence, although the provision has developed rapidly over the decades, it has only been available to those who tend to be wealthy, and without any financial and health problems, and who therefore can afford to participate in these university activities after their retirement.

The Case of Tokushima University

The University of Tokushima was established in the central part of Tokushima Prefecture in Shikoku Island located in south-western Japan in 1949 in accordance with the National School Establishment Law. It was one of the national universities which were set up in each of the local prefectures after the Second World War. However, its precursor had already existed since 1874 as the Tokushima Kisei Normal School [The University of Tokushima 2009]. For more than half a century, the university has developed to meet the needs of academics, professionals, and the community, and has experienced a number of organisational changes, such as integration and reform of existing academic departments and institutes. The university has five faculties (Integrated Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmaceutical Sciences) and seven graduate schools. Along with this, it operates a medical and dental hospital and libraries. The university also has cooperative research centres and institutes including the Centre for University Extension, the Centre for Advanced Information Technology, the International Centre, the Institute for Enzyme Research, the Institute for Genome Research, the Institute of Health Biosciences, and the Radioisotope Research Centre. It has about 7,900 students and 1,900 staff members. As the names of the faculties and research centres show, it is largely a science-oriented university and therefore its reputation is mainly established in these fields. The university management has been re-regulated since 2004, at the time of nationwide incorporation of national universities.

The Centre for University Extension was established within the University in April 1986 with 13 members of the academic staff, just after the Faculty of Education was reorganised into the Faculty of Integrated Arts and Sciences [Centre for University Extension 2006:15]. At first, there was no building for this centre, and parts of the Faculty of Integrated Arts and Sciences were used for providing extension courses. Two years later, a new three-story building was built especially for this centre, with a total area of 2660m². This new centre developed gradually along with the nationwide promotion of lifelong learning from the 1990s. In 1987, there were 38 courses with 614 students, and later in 1995, there was 50 courses with 1358 students. In 2009, there were 133 courses with 2503 students and the number of courses and students is the largest among all national universities. The centre has also been charged with staff development, and half the members of this centre are now engaged in this role. The subjects provided are varied, including the humanities, social science, natural science, information technology, health and sports, arts, international exchange, career development, collaborative courses with local governments in terms of agriculture and environment, and so forth. Meanwhile, there are many of the students' own associations as well as circles of like-minded people, and several different student groups have regular meetings and conduct their own activities using the centre's classrooms and facilities.

In order to improve the contents of courses as well as the university's infrastructure and to discover future potential, questionnaire surveys were conducted annually from May to July by the author over the last three years (2008, 2009, 2010) with students who had been taking courses at this centre. In each year, several questions were prepared in order to find out the needs of students as well as to identify their underlying worries and problems while taking courses. In each year, nearly half of all the students responded to the survey. The result was announced at a public hearing which was held each September, where most members of the academic staff, clerical staff, and mature students gathered and discussed the details of the outcomes of the survey. The following is the main summary of these surveys:

Firstly, regarding the backgrounds of students, it is noticeable that more than three quarters of all students are aged over 50 and are housewives or people who are retired and can afford to attend these courses without any financial or physical problems. People who are working on a full-time basis mostly aged between 20 and 50s hardly use this kind of centre. This can also be seen in most types of lifelong learning centre across the nation, and it can be said that this is the main feature of the 'Japanese pattern of lifelong learning'. In order to resolve this situation, a more flexible learning

system should be introduced, together with appropriate labour policies that are backed by central government.

Secondly, approximately one quarter of the students are newly enrolled students, whilst the rest are all repeaters. The main trigger to come to the centre in the first place was 'just interested in a course after reading through the printed programme', which accounted for 48%, followed by 'introduction through friends and acquaintances' accounting for 34%, 'saw it on an Internet site' for 7%, 'saw it in a newspaper ad' for 7% and so forth. Since Tokushima is in a rural area of Japan and public transportation is not well developed, word of mouth communication is still very effective in this regard. At the same time, students' associations can also play a significant role in the intake of new students.

Thirdly, with regard to the motive to come to learn at this centre, 61% of students answered that they simply wish to develop themselves into more cultured/educated adults, whilst 17% answered they want to make friends in their retirement. About one quarter of students come to the centre for the fulfilment of their intellectual interests, and the same proportion come to improve the quality of their retired lives. Though numbers are small, some people come to the centre 'to have a chance to learn at the university' and to maintain a connection with society. On the other hand, very few said that they come to use the centre for vocational purposes, such as their career development and/or qualifications, despite the fact that more than 60% of older adults in their 60s said that they still wish to work according to the nationwide survey [Nishimura, Shimomura, Fukamachi, and Muroyama 2010]. This aspect has been long neglected in this centre and in most institutions for lifelong learning in this country as well, and therefore has to be considered more seriously in order to match current societal needs. Overall, while most students expect a 'high quality of learning' in the university environment, their actual intentions are not always related to their original expectations. Further, about one third of students are also taking courses in other institutions outside the university; however the distinction of their purposes between learning at the university and learning at other institutions remains blurred.

Fourthly, regarding the viewpoint of social contribution, one quarter of all the students responded that they were actively engaged in some kind of volunteer activity after taking their courses. For example, a student who took a language course makes use of her knowledge and skill by being involved in international exchange activities etc. Yet, some students said that they wish to learn how they could contribute to society by using what they have learnt more specifically, as they received no advice or suggestions through lectures during their courses. On the other hand, about one quarter of students answered that they have not been engaged in any social activities after their courses, and they were not willing to do so as they had studied just for their own interest and do not like to be obliged to do more.

Fifthly, lack of support and guidance throughout students' learning processes are pointed out repeatedly. This was also due to a shortage of staff who can cope with these aspects appropriately. Some students complained that they were not able to connect their interests to one particular course due to lack of sufficient information provided by the university, while other students answered that they could not expand their learning after taking one course, and the provision of courses was not systematically well organised. At present, although some academic staff specialise in this field, no guidance and support experts are employed who could respond to these worries and anxieties of students. Therefore, this issue should be more seriously deliberated in the future management of the centre.

Sixthly, since the university is science-oriented and therefore most members of the academic staff are from this background, many students wished to take more subjects in the field of humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, music, arts, archaeology, economics, politics, and outside activities such as climbing mountains, taking a greater variety of language courses, and so forth. This was mentioned every year, and it is regarded as a basic weakness of this centre.

Seventhly, the building of the centre was not well designed for the elderly and those who had special needs and therefore more improvements in infrastructure were pointed out, including the refurbishment of toilet facilities, air conditioning, drinking services and so on.

Thus, the Centre for University Extension within the University of Tokushima is one of the pioneer universities in Japan. It began operation in the mid-1980s and it is in fact well-known for its relatively well-equipped facilities, for having the largest intake of adult students and the greatest uptake of its extension courses among national universities. Yet, there remain many unsolved problems in reality, and more serious consideration is required to resolve these current issues.

Concluding Remarks

Japanese UCE has gradually developed since the 1970s and has seen real expansion throughout the 1990s, along with the nationwide promotion of lifelong learning backed by international trends and internal legislative changes. The proportion of universities which are engaged in university extension courses has increased dramatically since then. At the same time, as well as providing extension courses, the importance of studying various aspects of lifelong learning and others has started to be recognised.

Established in 1949, the University of Tokushima is well-known especially in scientific fields. The Centre for University Extension was created 1986 within its site and since then, the centre's operation has developed both in practice and in theory, and it is now one of the leading institutes of this kind in Japan. Yet, the recent survey result shows that its actual students are confined to housewives and elderly people who tend to be wealthy with no financial problems, and that their intentions in coming to a centre of this kind are mostly non-vocational, such as to enrich their personal lives, to acquire academic knowledge, to fulfil their intellectual interests, to meet people and find friends etc. Few people have vocational purposes, such as taking exams to gain certain certificates or qualifications after their courses.

In facing the ageing society with a low birth-rate, Japanese UCE is now being required to widen its intake to include students of various ages, and the role of extension centres should be more flexibly expanded in the near future, together with appropriate labour policies that are backed by central government.

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