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Teachers and Tea-Fetchers – What the Future Holds for Japan's Junior College Graduates

Female student perceptions of the status, purpose, and value of a Junior College education

by

Patricia Walker

Senior Lecturer in Education Research
University of East London

Abstract

Throughout Japan, enrolments in junior colleges, previously the higher education destination of choice for nearly 500 000 women a year at their peak in 1990, has plummeted recently to half that number. It is therefore of interest to investigate the quality of experience and post-graduation aspirations of the decreasing numbers of women who have elected to take up the short- term route. This study investigates the mission of the junior college in the 21st century, the quality and status of the courses, the extent to which they prepare women for their career goals, and the value of the exit qualification in the employment market. In an intensive period of fieldwork in a small college on the Tokyo/Yokohama borders in the summer of 2005 the views of students and their tutors were elicited. It was found that, on the whole, high numbers of women were resigned to the gendered roles for which they have been socialized throughout their life course but that a growing minority were resolved to use their junior college degree to open up possibilities for further study and enter an arena where their economic outcomes could be expanded.

Introduction

Since vertical ranking is a salient feature of Japanese society this has naturally also encompassed the education system. Currently, a three-fold ranking exists in Japanese higher education. There are the former national universities, which were set up by the national government, local public and municipal universities established by prefectural and city governments, and private institutions under the responsibility of so so-called non-profit corporations. Institutions of higher education are classified either as universities (*daigaku*) or junior colleges *tanki daigaku*. However, it is generally accepted that problems of nomenclature occur when comparing systems of education and the term 'junior college' for the *tanki daigaku* is somewhat unsatisfactory in terms of its connotations in American and British English. It is often abbreviated in Japanese to *tandai*.

The *tanki daigaku* is actually a short-term (2-year) university. The official position of the ministry is that all that is required to enter any higher education institution is the completion of upper secondary schooling (equivalent to gaining a High School Diploma in the USA). While that may be the *de nomine* position, the *de facto* position is that the three-fold vertical ranking is reflected in the relative and proportionate competition for entry. National institutions are the most prestigious, and private institutions, with a few notable exceptions, rank next, behind national and prefectural universities. The *tandai* are predominantly private and were instituted after WWII to increase participation in higher education, predominantly for women.

This article is based on an intensive period of fieldwork in a women's college of religious affiliation in Kanagawa prefecture during the summer of 2005; known in the text as Christian College. It also draws on previous experience by the author in the academic year April 2000 – March 2001 as an invited Associate Professor in a *kenritsudaigaku* (prefectural university) in Shiga prefecture and concurrently, as is sometimes the custom for Japanese academics, in a small *tanki daigaku* in a semi-rural area: this institution is referred to below as Kyosen. It is also informed by a long professional relationship with Japanese university and junior college students on programmes of study in UK universities.

Background to the Study and research Issues

In 2001, Kyosen was one of the 58 per cent of 453 private 2 year institutions which failed to reach target enrolment that year. The academic staff were deeply worried whether by the next academic year a) the institution would still be in business, b) it would be but they personally wouldn't, or c) it would exist but in an unrecognisable form. Their concerns echoed those of Shimizu (1992) who posed a question relating to the impending outlook for the whole sector in his title *Tandai ni ashita wa aru ka* (Is there a future for the Junior Colleges?) In the face of the post-bubble economy and a declining college going population, Kyosen was fighting for survival.

The Monbukagakusho's (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, hereafter known by its English acronym MEXT) objectives for the *tanki daigaku* are articulated in official publications thus:

The purpose of junior colleges is to conduct in-depth learning and research in specialized disciplines and to develop abilities necessary for employment and daily life. (MEXT 2003: 22)

There seemed to the observer, however, a palpable lack of commitment on the part of some students and staff of Kyosen to these stated objectives; perhaps suggesting stakeholder anxiety about institutional status. This concomitant dissonance could be related either to the social function of junior college education or the status in the employment market of its exit qualification, or perhaps both. Although this theme of un[der]-employed junior college graduates is explored in Walker 2005, and further touched on in Walker 2007 (forthcoming) it was interesting to investigate further whether and to what extent these twin fears are conspiring to frustrate the original purpose of the junior college.

In addition to the concerns above, it should be noted that some commentators on Japanese higher education have expressed severe misgivings about the outcomes of a junior college education. For instance, Watanabe (2003: 433-449) claims that quality (measured against effectiveness in the labour market) is declining among higher educated workers in Japan and that the decline is greater among junior college graduates. This further underscores the claim that junior college education is focused on vocational professional competence. It is not unusual for institutional change to come about over time as governments and societies require more or different functions from their systems of education: we can consider the case of the British polytechnics' development into universities in 1992 to meet government's objective to increase higher education participation. However, when educators and labour economists alike dispute the claims that junior colleges are preparing young people to play a useful function in Japanese society, it is reasonable to inquire what exactly these institutions are offering Japanese youth and how valuable the exit qualification is in the 21st century global economy. Five years on since the problems of Kyosen became apparent, it seems that prospective students all over Japan are asking themselves the same question as enrolments in nearly all the *tandai* plummet.

The challenge of universal higher education

Goodman (2005: 4) notes that 'It is [nothing more than] a strange coincidence … that the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble coincided … with the peak of the number of eighteen-year-olds in the Japanese population'.

The 18-20 age group makes up more than 90 per cent of all students in higher education in Japan, so once the second children of the baby boom generation had moved on a subsequent decline in overall numbers in that age group was projected. Inevitably, it was assumed, this diminution would impact adversely on the fee-dependent private institutions, accounting for 86 per cent of all Japanese HEIs and 77 per cent of total student enrollments, and confirmed by Nagasawa of PROPHE in 2005. It was expected that demand across the sector would decrease because of the diminished pool of potential clientele, but 'the actual number going to university actually increased by 21.9%' (Goodman 2005: 5). This can be explained by an accompanying increase in the supply side stimulating even greater demand. A number of brand new universities were created, but the real difference to the higher education landscape was caused by the merger of many junior colleges with neighbouring universities, and the opportunity seized by some others to change their designation to four year institutions. So now, in a system of virtually universal higher education, there are even more university places available in Japan and fewer institutions offering women the short term programmes of higher education study they have traditionally made use of.

It becomes, therefore, of even greater importance to investigate the quality of experience and prospective economic outcomes of the shrinking cohort which elects to take up the junior college route.

Research Questions

In order to investigate the status, purpose and value of Japanese short- term higher education, almost synonymous with higher education for women, there were basically two lines of enquiry directing this research.

The first relates to the major stakeholders, namely, the providers and users; to investigate whether and to what extent they are aware of, and commit to, the mission of the institution, and how they judge their status in society and the employment market. It was also of interest to try to determine how staff viewed their own and the institution's future in the light of falling rolls, college closures, institutional mergers and isomorphologies; how the end-users, the students, evaluate their courses of study and in particular their potential for preparing for the world of work.

The second, through work in the field, investigates the current health of short-term higher education in Japan in light of the post-bubble economy and decline in the size of the college going population, and to gauge the employment opportunities for young women in the traditionally male dominated Japanese workplace. In this way it attempts to probe the value of the junior college associate degree in the current employment market in Japan.

Methodology

This small scale study explored the life choices of young women who have opted for the 2-year higher education option, as opposed to the 4-year university: what career aspirations they espoused; what they and their teachers saw as the mission of the junior college in the 21st century; and to what extent their investment in higher education was likely to be realized.

Research location

The original plan was to collect data in two junior colleges. Institution A is a women's college with 1000 students on roll in suburban Tokyo. Institution B has 200 female students in greater Yokohama. On day 1 of the fieldwork it was reported that, in a meeting at Institution A, staff were informed of the imminent closure of the college . Given the sensitivity and potential fall-out of this policy the college was unlikely to give permission for the research to go ahead. However, this development in itself provided a valuable illustration of the health of short -term education in Japan in keeping with the research questions. The empirical data therefore was collected solely in Institution B which I refer to here as Christian College.

Research Instruments

Student questionnaire

The majority of students enrolled follow an English language and Anglophone culture course. Because of this relative advantage the student questionnaire, which was the main data collection instrument, was produced in English and distributed during the compulsory modules in English oral communication, thus ensuring a high response rate. The questions asked in the field were targeted at the research questions relating to both the quality and relevance of the junior college educational experience and the currency of the associate degree in the labour market expressed through the post-graduation aspirations of the students. Active participation of students was encouraged by visits to each individual class with explanation and discussion of the project and its research issues.

Staff interviews

Ten staff interviews were conducted. The interviews were targeted at answering the research questions relating to:

1. the quality of the college experience from the point of view of those providing the education;
2. the mission of the junior college in 21st century Japan
3. the future for junior colleges.

Key themes in the literature

Gender inequality in educational attainment in Japan

Gender inequality in educational attainment remains a salient feature of contemporary Japanese society, not throughout the system but at tertiary level. Since 1975, the advancement rate to high school has topped over ninety percent for both males and females. However, a significantly lower proportion of women historically have advanced to four-year universities relative to men. For decades academics and journalists have demonstrated that junior college education is synonymous with women's education (Hunter 1989, Condon 1991, Fujimura-Fanselow 1985, Fujimura-Fanselow & Imamura 1991, Brinton 1993).

Equally, it is well documented that women's education leads to 'women's work'; the heavily gendered curriculum of the junior college (McVeigh:1997:146) trains women for gendered occupations. The 'feminine' subjects, which in most cases are the only ones available to and studied by the vast majority of women, erect obstructions to a range of careers for which junior college graduates are effectively excluded. Only the 4-year universities offer a curriculum leading to the professions (law, medicine, academia and so forth).

The reasons for Japanese women being 'a half step behind' as Condon (1991) asserts, are linked to the Confucian philosophy which fosters patriarchal gender systems demanding obedience first to the father, then to the husband, and then to the son. Traditionally women were viewed as somehow 'childlike' and therefore both inherently inferior and in need of men's protection (Dower 1993: 262). Therefore, when in 1947 the new Constitution explicitly acknowledged that women were to have equal opportunities, it was agreed that they should have the benefit of higher education (but not too much), thus the genesis of the junior college.

Brinton points out that education was regarded as important for women principally to enable them to fulfil their important roles as daughters wives and mothers. As investors in the human capital of the next generation, women must be well-trained. If anything, it could be argued that this role was accentuated by the heightened educational competition in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s' (1993: 198).

Gender inequality in the labour force

Gender inequality at the exit point of the education system leads directly to gender inequality in the workplace. Yamaguchi (1986: 116), commenting on the traditional role of women in the economy, notes that, 'While women make a significant contribution to the economy many feel, with some justification that they are still treated as reserve labour'. Opinion polls throughout the nineties, according to Kingston (2000: 68), indicated that women felt that their lives, although immeasurably better than their grandmothers' and mothers', were still not equal to men's and, though they did not wish to return to the bad old days of enforced marriage, with young brides in thrall to tyrannical mothers-in-law, they were not fulfilled. Yet carving out a role for themselves in the economy was inconsistent historically with the Japanese ideal of women. Brinton (1993: 199) touches on this, by stating that, 'the labor market incentives that motivate males to acquire higher education have not applied to females' and adds, interestingly, 'Nor has the Japanese government promoted policies encouraging women to enter four-year universities.'

The gender-segregated labor market is infamous for its differential demand for skills. In former times, 70 per cent of large companies did not even accept applications from female university graduates (Condon 1991: 194). Once hired, Saso (1990) details how women are less likely to be placed in the internal labor market where considerable on-the-job training is available, and earnings are determined heavily by seniority. Although women's labour force participation in Japan now surpasses fifty percent – a proportion comparable to Western counterparts – a majority of these women are relegated to the secondary (or external) labor market, confined to job assignments which require little skill and training. An explanation offered by Houseman and Abraham (1993) is that employers fear women will leave the labor force upon marriage and therefore returns from investments made in their training will be lost, thus ensuring that women continue to be hired into short term posts. Moreover, employers recruit high school and junior college graduates into these positions whenever possible so they can be paid less than university graduates.

According to Brinton (1993: 205) gendered tracking begins in the home. 'A strong belief in sex-based socialization of children is complemented by sharply different educational aspirations for sons and daughters'. She describes this as 'a yawning gap' which 'cannot be dismissed as an East-Asian phenomenon' since research has indicated that this attitude is emphatically not held in Korea, for instance, where mothers have almost equal educational aspirations for boys and girls.

Ono's (2000) study similarly demonstrates that women's aspirations to pursue university education traditionally have been downgraded precisely because their opportunities in the job market are much less than for males with the same qualifications. He also points to gender inequality within the Japanese family in a study investigating parental investment in sons' and daughters' education (Ono 2002). His results showed that parents are reluctant to invest in expensive university education for their daughters because they believe neither they nor the women themselves can expect a good return. It is incontestable that the salary gap between men and women in Japan is the widest in the developed world and, at least at the time that Lam (1992: 253) was writing, alone amongst the OECD countries, is actually widening.

As in most of the countries of East Asia, education in Japan is seen as an essential positional good and families are prepared to pay as much as they can. University education is undoubtedly a sizable investment in time and money. Tuition fees are high and living costs in some cities prohibitive, which is why many Japanese students are daily commuters travelling hours to the campus and frequently sleeping through the first class of the day (Walker 2001). Parental contribution according to Nakata and Mosk (1986: 377-404) is about 80 per cent of their children's (direct and indirect) educational expenses, a proportion that is undoubtedly higher than in most industrial countries. This leaves the student to find 20 per cent, hence the ubiquitous *arubaito* (part-time job) which can account for many hours during the semester and considerably more during the vacation. All households however, regardless of the relative prosperity of large numbers of Japanese compared with many of their Asian neighbours, have finite resources. It is much more likely that families will tend to allocate greater resources to sons than to daughters. It is worth reminding ourselves also that opportunities for part-time study are very limited. There are few 'Returning to learning' courses and 'Earn as you learn' schemes in Japan. For most women there is only one throw of the dice.

Education and Marriage

An important factor influencing women's career trajectories is that Japan is still a universal marriage society. As Hunter (1989: 152) observes, 'The continuing assumption that women's main task is marriage and home is reflected both in marriage levels and in employment patterns.' One of Condon's (1991: 193) respondents describes the traditional position. 'My old college friends who are married are all housewives. … We don't talk any more. We have nothing in common. They look down on me. I'm not a complete woman to them. Since I don't have a family, I'm defective.'. Another describes her view of the predictable and stereotypical behaviour of female graduates. 'My brother married the typical Japanese woman. She went to university but didn't study a lot. She did the usual lessons in bridal training: cooking, flower-arranging, and tea ceremony. … After graduation she worked for about two years. She saved all her money for her wedding' (Condon 1991:184).

Many families still believe that, the better educated the woman, the worse are her marriage prospects. Mothers may downgrade their daughters' educational aspirations by handing down the commonly cited mantra that 'a woman who is too smart can't find a husband' Iwao (1993). Iwao goes on to say that many men in Japan are 'intimidated by a woman who has a high income or an outstanding academic pedigree' (1993: 60). This is confirmed by Hamana's 1990 study, which found that men were more likely to marry women with lower educational credentials relative to themselves, thus leading to a further downgrading of women's educational aspirations. Indeed, Rutherford, Ogawa & Matsukara (2001) observed that 'late marriage and less marriage in Japan' is a direct result of growing numbers of women eschewing junior college for the longer term university and the consequent longer term career outcomes which result.

It is commonly accepted that, since promotion is based on uninterrupted tenure, married women are further disadvantaged because of taking enforced breaks for child-rearing and care of the aged. Brinton (1993: 204-5) points to the '… relative insignificance of education in predicting women's employment patterns mirrored by an absence of marked change in the behaviour of young women in the mid 80s compared to their counterparts two decades earlier. Women are better educated yet still employers discriminate against highly educated women'.

Women's employment and the law

In 1985, the Japanese Diet passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (hereafter EEO Law), coming into effect on April 1, 1986. This law prohibits gender discrimination with respect to vocational training, fringe benefits, retirement, and dismissal, and urges firms to try to equalize opportunity with regard to recruitment, hiring, job assignment, and promotion. McVeigh (1997: 147) refers to the 'cultivation of office flowers'. Pretty, decorative females often seem to be literally for display purposes only. Knapp's article of (2000) has the eponymous title 'Still Office Flowers…' to describe women workers, regardless of their education, and judges that the EEO has done little to give women parity with men in terms of salary or status. Gelb (2000) examining a decade since the legislation came into force (if one can use that word since firms are not forced, but are merely exhorted to comply) found that the law has produced few gains for women but that there has been an increase in consciousness and activism amongst women and efforts at litigation. Roberts (2005) points to Japan as the first industrialized nation in East Asia (providing a model for the other emerging economies of Taiwan and Korea), yet it lags behind virtually all other industrialized nations in the strictly gendered organization of its workforce and workplace culture. Although amendments to the EEOL were passed in 1997, until 1999 job openings throughout Japan were posted by gender. Thus, in the recession-hit employment market, women graduates found it difficult to get interviews, even (or especially) those who had studied abroad and could speak good English.

A suitable higher education for women

Fujimura-Fanselow and Imamura (1991: 230) remark that the junior college graduate is regarded by employers as *sunao* (biddable, obedient) whereas the female university graduate can be *namaiki* (impudent). Worse still, foreign educated female workers find that prospective employers see them as strident and opinionated and threatening to the *wa* (harmony) of the office. A highly talented young woman who assisted me in my recent fieldwork, graduate of an American university as well as a Japanese university, with virtually faultless English, almost a year after returning to Japan has failed to secure full time employment. She told me, 'Maybe I'm loud since I was in America'.

Throughout its history the *tandai* has positioned itself as the most suitable, at least in terms of conventional social and cultural norms, form of higher education for women, aside from allowing them to enter the job market two years earlier than their 4 year university peers and so earn money before the time came to be *ryōsai kenbo* or 'good wives and wise mothers'. Notwithstanding, the principal reason for the drop in numbers throughout the junior college sector is because women are eschewing their traditional destination, as the table below shows, to enroll in increasing numbers in the 4 yr institutions which they previously considered outside their league.

Table 1. Women's Enrolment in Higher Education Institutions (1960 – 2003, Various Years)

	4 year institution			**2 year institution**		
	total no. of students	of which female =	female as % of total	total no. of students	of which female =	female as % of total
1970	1,406,521	252,745	18	263,219	217,668	82.7
1980	1,835,312	405,529	22.1	371,124	330,468	89
1990	2,133,362	584,155	27.4	479,389	438,443	91.5
2000	2,740,023	992,312	36.2	327,680	293,690	89.6
2001	2,765,705	1,026,398	37.1	289,198	258,107	89.2
2003	2,803,908	1,087,431	38.8	250,062	220,090	88.0

Source: MEXT Website: http://www.mext.go.jp/english/statist/06060808/pdf/080.pdf, accessed 7 December 2005 (data combined by the author and presented side by side for comparison and ease of reference).

The table above clearly shows the differential in enrolment figures in the two forms of higher education (4-year university and 2-year junior college). In both types of institution, numbers of females advancing to higher education has increased year on year. Those in the 2-year increased steadily until 1990, then began to slide. In that year, when the second 'Baby Boom' babies applied to enter higher education, approximately 150,000 separated the university and junior college female enrolments figures (584,155 women in universities/ 438,443 in junior colleges). This represents a high for the period in junior colleges, which proceeded to decline by approximately half to 220,090 in 2003. By contrast female enrolment in universities rose from after 1990 from 584,155 to 1.087 million, representing an increase of nearly 100%.

It is clear from the discussion above, that since the beginning of the 21st century, not only has women's participation in higher education been rising across the HE sector, growing numbers are opting for the more expensive (because longer) university course, despite its costs over the same period rising faster than the rate of inflation and faster than the growth in household income (Edwards and Pasquale, 2002). This change in college going behaviour goes hand in hand with credential inflation. It is incontestable, therefore, that the value of the associate (junior college) degree is driven down as a consequence.

The Conduct of the Research

In week 1 of the study a survey was conducted of every student on campus on the days in question. This amounted to 130 of about 200 students on roll. There were opportunities for multiple responses, and further individual personal comment was encouraged so that responses have been tallied and presented in terms of frequency of response and raw numbers rather than means. In week 2 staff interviews commenced and continued throughout the duration of the stay. A range of staff were selected, Japanese and foreign, newly appointed and experienced. In week 3, having established a certain familiarity with students, group discussions were held followed by a number of self-referring student interviews.

The sample is considered to be fairly representative of the general junior college population, for instance, there was some commonality with those previously studied in Kyosen. Whether they are representative is, however, not so significant. They are similar in many ways, in other ways they are unique, and are interesting to us both for their uniqueness and their commonality.

Increasingly, commentators are giving attention to the junior college in crisis, yet little has been heard of the perceptions of the participants. There are about 221,000 junior college students in Japan at present and their stories deserve to be told. Their numbers may be dwindling but their views are crucial to our understanding of this particular sector of Japanese higher education. The emphasis in this study is on the voices of some of these women and their tutors.

Findings

There were four lines of enquiry

The mission of the junior college in the 21st century – staff and student awareness

The mission of the junior college seems to have become obscured over the years and many staff delivering courses revealed, through interviews, that they were quite unaware of its history and purpose. Exceptionally, one young British tutor observed that its function was to produce skills for work, but most staff had no idea about the mission, the history or the original purpose of the junior college. An American lecturer believed it was to help students who hadn't got into university first time round, a second chance (something like the 13+ exam for those who failed the 11+), or a high class *juku*. Another commented 'It's not students' first choice, it's last choice'.

A Japanese academic was very matter of fact. 'Junior Colleges are closing – the original mission is obviously failing so, closures'. Nevertheless, she could see that, 'There is still a place as it is now, there is competition for the good schools, junior college is stage one of an academic career. It's not an end in itself; if so, we wouldn't be here, not in business'.

Other experienced staff, aware that this was not in fact the original purpose but, aware of the growing numbers of women aspiring to four year courses, could see a market niche opening up for junior colleges in crisis. According to one, in some departments they actually 'train them to transfer … they are required to study hard, harder than the 4 year students, especially if they failed to enter university first time. Half of Department X go on to university, if Christian College recommends them they accept them'.

It would seem the changes to the mission are coming not from within the system but to pressure from the consumers who are using it as a first step to enter university in Japan, or conversely, an institution abroad. One comment was 'type of students is different now, students used to come from what was originally a mission school, they were high quality' [implying they aren't now]. However, it is said that, 'the students who transfer from this college directly into the third year of university are often better students than those already there who have spent the last two years playing … they are older, they don't skip class'. The staff member explained 'Junior college students replace wastage, Monbukagakusho sets a quota for each *daigaku*'. A professsor with two decades of experience pointed to demographic changes and a weak economy. He emphasized that 'Two years is better for some parents'. He implied that a few years ago they (Christian College) thought it was all over, however, they are still in business. It is clear that many staff working in junior colleges, despite the writing on the wall, believe they will weather these storms and endure. He went on, 'I have a strong hope to survive even in a different situation'.

The status of a junior college education – how colleges attract applications and why women apply

Academic staff testimony

Professor M explained that Christian College has a number of policies and procedures to facilitate applications. Firstly it has its own high school feeder. Like so many institutions it also has arrangements with other high schools, then, at the exit point, has arrangements with universities to take its graduates. He added that a common incentive to enrol in this college is its international links. 'Many Japanese young women have a strong desire to go abroad'.

Writers have commented on Japan's use of *kokusaika* (internationalisation) in higher education from which Japan has tended to be a beneficiary rather than a benefactor (Walker 1997, 2005: 171). So an international connection is seen by many institutions as an added incentive to attract students from the shrinking pool of prospective clients. Christian College has links with institutions in Australia, Canada and the UK providing study abroad opportunities in English language (a further attraction) and increasing the importance of the Anglophone courses at home. Some students touched on this in the questionnaire. McVeigh found a similar attraction in his study of 'Takasu' junior college. He comments 'As in so many other spheres of Japanese society, it is considered quite fashionable to possess an 'international milieu' (1997: 69).

A different perspective was offered by Professor N who stressed that above all, 'The product is good, it transforms women into something better … Mothers in Japan want daughters to have a junior college education – it's traditional, men are central, don't want women spending too many years, there are economic reasons, two years is better, cheaper than four.' This implies that Japanese parents are seen as the clients, perhaps because, as we have seen, they tend to shoulder the majority of the financial burden of higher education.

The majority of staff interviewed identified low academic standards relative to four year universities which they felt had an effect on the student profile. One foreign lecturer with experience of a number of institutions in Japan said 'It's not challenging … they have lowered the bar and this impacts on the quality of the student experience, they gear the curriculum to the lower students, … the teaching in the high schools impacts on college learning, still committed to short term memory [a reference to surface learning]. I feel like I'm babysitting, but if we didn't take them [low achieving students] we'd go out of business'. This was also the position in the Shiga prefecture college Kyosen in 2001 (Walker 2005:176). 'Institutions will take all comers rather than close down departments and fire professors (although in some colleges they are also doing this)'.

On the other hand, a Japanese academic who has worked extensively in European universities wasn't convinced that 4-year students were any more academic. On the contrary, 'I visited K [a very prestigious national university] many Japanese students male and female are so lazy – they didn't come to school after Golden Week, only the foreign students like the Filipinos came'…Junior College students are more serious'.

The lack of rigour in assessment practices in Japan, which seems to some western academics to be left to the whim of individual professors and is characterized by a very low failure rate, was implied by an experienced Japanese tutor. 'There isn't parity across the curriculum, in department X students get failed.' Furthermore, 'we give so much attention to the weak, we should give attention to the stronger'.

Student testimony

The majority of students surveyed predominantly gave as their reason for enrolling in the junior college, 'to learn skills for the workplace (56 responses) 'preparation for a career' (45 responses) 'wanted a 2 yr qualification' (38 responses) (n = 139), indicating that students embrace the stated mission of the junior college to prepare them for working life.

Asked to comment further in their own words, a significant number of students confided that they would prefer to transfer after graduation to a university in Japan or equally to an institution abroad, [which they know Christian College can facilitate]. This is interesting because it entirely contradicts their selections above from the choices I offered in the questionnaire. Academics, as we have seen, also commented on the ambition of many students to progress from the college to university or study abroad.

Asked why they chose to enrol at Christian College specifically, as opposed to another college, students were invited to make multiple responses to the options offered. Sixty-eight selected high school teacher's recommendation, often known as Principal's recommendation, and 44 said high school recommendation system, a different way of expressing the arrangement mentioned above. Thus 112 of the 130 students polled entered the college by a fast tracking system. One student further commented that 'Christian College has a high school from which progress to the college is virtually automatic'. These responses make very clear that the likelihood of acceptance is a primary motivation for applying to this institution.

Other common responses included, 'Convenient location' [the college is a five minute walk from a subway station] and, 'influenced by the college's reputation' earned 47 and 25 responses respectively. Other students were brutally honest, admitting 'because I could gain entrance' and 'because the entrance exam was easy' (28 responses). A small number of students made it clear that they were aware of the 'high number of Christian College students transferred to university at the end of their course' (5 responses) and that 'Christian College has a number of international partners offering study abroad opportunities' (2 responses). The international factor, though selected by only 2 on this item, crops up time and time again in answer to a number of questions and is often mentioned by the staff as a pull factor, though how significant this is in reality is debatable. As we learned from McVeigh earlier, in Japan an international facade is all that is required.

How students evaluate their courses in the light of the college mission to prepare them for the world of work

When asked if they felt the courses offered at Christian College prepared them for careers, about a third of the responses indicated that students felt the college was not preparing them for careers. However, the majority seemed to feel strongly that the college was preparing them for employment, indeed, opening up job opportunities for them by virtue of knowledge and skills obtained on course. It is worth mentioning in passing, however, that students anywhere in the world are not always aware of the transferable skills and knowledge they are gaining.

Asked to explain how they were being prepared for employment some students simply stated, 'I am getting a qualification [crucial in a credential society] … all the classes offered are related to my career'. Many declared they were learning the knowledge and skills they needed though they did not specifically name them. Communication courses were frequently cited as being useful in developing a range of good communication skills for future careers and especially dealing with a range of clients. A small but significant number stated that a knowledge of French was relevant. These were students interested in careers related to what students called 'aroma' or 'esthetics' or in patisserie or cosmetic companies. Some felt they needed to go to France to embark on such careers – possibly an unrealistic expectation. The putative international ambience of Christian College was thought to be beneficial 'We have a lot of opportunities to meet foreigners which will help my future career.'

The magic ingredient in the overwhelming majority of cases is the ability to speak and understand English. It is seen as an instrument to facilitate every challenging task that working life can devise. Students testified that English, which is a specialism for the majority of students in the college but a core course for everyone, is important. 'To communicate in a shop,… for cabin crew, …for international life.' 'Polite English is necessary to be able to speak to customers' because, 'English is spoken in many countries. Editorial staff are sent to many countries UK, US,' implying that they need only pack a bag and go. Students took it as read that 'English is essential for PC users and secretaries'. According to these students even a travel agency is 'international', that therefore international language is necessary, and therefore English is necessary. The final word goes to the student who claims 'English is useful for any job.'

There were a few surprising comments. 'I'm already a teacher of English but my English isn't good enough.' 'I want to save refugees in the world.' 'I want to be a pilot so English is relevant.'

Most students implied that a junior college qualification would be an appropriate grounding for anything they went on to do, presumably because of English and the vaguely middle class ethos they would be able to emanate in the work place, but seemed unaware that they are restricted in what they can do by virtue of their absolute lack of specialist knowledge, mandatory for some careers such as being a professional pilot, from which they are excluded.

Junior colleges are said not only to prepare students for jobs but actually help them obtain one. These students, when asked, seemed very confident of help, but did not seem to have much idea of what this help might consist of. 'Teachers are very kind here so I expect they'll help me find a job when I know what I want to do, perhaps introduction to companies, recommendations.' There were also some rather unrealistic expectations. 'They'll tell me what kind of job suits me.' However, staff were judged to be very supportive, 'I had great support so far, they listen to us and give us support, advice.' Nevertheless, students expressed some concern about their future, 'I want to insure my future … Find a job which suits me well… I want a scholarship to go abroad … tell me about foreign universities. I'll find out for myself but I'd like their opinion.'

Students had clear ideas about what actions would help, 'How to write CVs, How to study English effectively, Good job search guidance, Interview Practice.' And summing it all up, 'Classes which help me to find a job.'

Overall 78 students said they expected help, 51 didn't want help and 15 did not answer.

With all this help available, students were asked how well prepared they felt they were for working life. The greatest number of students (66) chose 'not really prepared' and the next most frequently cited, 'quite well prepared' (42) 'not at all prepared' (33), and only 13 students said they felt 'very well prepared'. This is not as contradictory as it seems. Students who filled in the questionnaire were from both first and second year. It is highly likely that the first year students might feel unprepared at this stage of their course but the second years felt a greater degree of preparedness. Further research might pursue this.

The majority of students (72) agreed with the statement that there was job-oriented content in the course and 47 thought there was not. Students offered the following as examples of job oriented course content:

English for business communication, not directly but English is related to job hunting, oral communication in English, conversation, use of polite English, TOEIC class [Test of English for International Communication], teaching English to children, secretarial qualification, office theory, human relations, business administration, preparing office documents, general principles of office work, computing, teaching practice, professional teaching qualification, economics, social psychology, languages.

Others implied that the skills and knowledge gained through the teaching methodology was useful. For example, 'We watch films, read magazines, use internet.' A couple of students offered 'tour guide class', though it is not clear whether this is an example of new curriculum – or the foreign English teacher's role play activity which I observed. Another cited 'A class teaching manners for job hunting', something which came up frequently elsewhere, indicating how aware students are of prospective employers' high expectations regarding demeanour and appearance and the concomitant level of anxiety about future economic outcomes.

Asked if the course provided training for work, 19 said they didn't expect or want any training for work in college. They felt that the company they work for would give them training. However, in reality, this is much more likely to be provided for men, as we saw earlier (Saso 1990).

Seventy respondents said that elements of training were embedded in the course including: 'How to respond to answers during interviews, business words, communication skills, computer skills, management, Japanese expression' the ubiquitous 'English' and especially 'English for business communication, English [for] tour conductor', and 'English for secretarial skills'. One student volunteered 'The weakness in my PR has been pointed out.' Forty-five students said there was no training.

Through many years of working with Japanese students in the UK I have observed that, as a group, they are very reluctant to make overt criticisms especially when it appears to be directed at people older and, apparently, 'wiser'. The lifetime loyalty Japanese students pay to their *sensei* is universally acknowledged. A question directed at piercing this cloak of politeness simply asked if they would recommend a junior college to a friend. Forty per cent of those surveyed said they would not.

In terms of the career trajectories of the women, what value can we place on the junior college associate degree in the employment market?

We have already seen that the limited curriculum in most colleges cannot furnish students with the specialist knowledge required for entry to the major professions such as law, professions allied to health, science related careers and so on. Christian College students tend to follow 2 major programmes: Anglophone society and culture, or French language and culture. Students made more than one response to the question of their 'dream' career, with the result that there were 178 responses. These can be grouped together under a number of headings which, as the discussion below demonstrates, represented only 7 major activities, most falling clearly into a range of stereotypical images of the Japanese woman.

Teaching and Nurturing (43 responses)

The greatest number of responses pointed to some form of work with children. Apart from a relatively small number who wanted to teach French, the greatest number of students said they wanted to teach English but almost unanimously specified to small children, some added 'my own children', and one optimistic soul wanted to teach English in the US, which suggests she was responding spontaneously to an 'ideal' vision for herself – otherwise, they see themselves as cultivating rather than instructing. Examples include: Teacher of English (in USA), primary school teacher, teacher of English for small children, teach English to my children, kindergarten teacher.

(Quasi) Internationally related careers (28 responses)

These roles included ground staff, flight attendant cabin crew and the like. Some specified roles were international only by implication, such as tour guide, travel agent, customs agent, or just vaguely 'working at airline'. One student offered pilot, perhaps foregrounding the concept of 'dream' in the instruction to write down their dream career. Small numbers mentioned doing any type of work in a foreign company and single individuals mentioned working abroad. Moreover, there is an interesting fashion at present in Japan. French pastries and confectionary are considered very chic. A small but persistent group cited the 'dream' of becoming a patissier.

Predominantly female career domains (25 responses)

These careers included: sales assistants, buyers (especially of imported goods – the international cachet again), and particularly cosmetics and clothes, and anything fashion related. Cosmetics was very high on the wish list with make up artist, beautician, aromatherapist, and beauty treatment clinic specified. Obviously the last mentioned implies the need for further training – but students gave the impression they simply wanted to be associated with these glamorous roles in whatever capacity. Three students aspired to a rather recent career - Wedding planner.

OL, or office lady (24 responses)

A popular nickname – in English typically - indicates its very ubiquity. Although students specified a range of preferred roles, nearly all are low level subservient female roles found in nearly all businesses in Japan. The OL arrives at the office half an hour before the male employees, makes the tea in readiness for their arrival, photocopies documents, organizes the conference table, and goes out at lunchtime to bring back the *o-bento* (take-out boxed lunch, such as sushi) for the boss. I have also seen office staff in Japanese institutions of higher education working unpaid overtime, including on Sundays before important, let us say 'open days', on the Monday. Included in this category were: Office lady, regular employee in a company/ … in an office , … in a hotel, receptionist, secretary, bank clerk, medical clerk , trading officer.

Caring roles (19 responses)

The point has been made above that higher education, especially short-term, is thought to enhance the resume of young women in the marriage market. This desire to make young women more attractive as wives can be enhanced if the resulting career complements her preparation for being a 'good wife wise mother'. Thus a significant number of respondents cited vague yet worthy occupations such as: helping in the third world, working with people, communicating with people, making people happy, and the ubiquitous child care. Careers related to the 'greying of society', something of a growth industry in Japan, were cited, including: welfare, taking care of people, taking care of old people,

Communication related careers (15 responses)

These respondents were communication majors, a very general course unlikely to lead to a specialist career in publishing. Choices included: translator (of children's stories), interpreter, editor, mass communication, women's magazine, publishing.

Show business (16 responses)

It seems likely that the desire for such careers reflects the putative hedonism of young single peoples' lives in Japan, rather than their specialist fields of study. There is no evidence that this religious foundation women's college provided background or training for a working life in the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, DJ, dancer, actress, movie director, playwright, novelist, cartoon writer, model, Hollywood editor, artist, illustrator, film production (one person specified with Warner Bros), movie company or music related company were cited by respondents.

As with many questionnaires, this one threw up a number of outliers, eight in all: missionary, private detective and biologist (though there is no science course at Christian College). Bucking the trend, 4 students claimed to want to be housewives, and sadly one student wrote 'nothing'.

Discussion and Conclusions

Since the majority of staff teaching in junior colleges are somewhat unaware of their mission, it cannot be otherwise that there is a certain amount of dissonance experienced by students and the educational professionals delivering the programmes in respect of their purpose, their status in society, and value in the employment market. Besides, it is clear that the junior college mission is changing, and not by the ministry's edict but in response to student demands. At Christian College I was aware of a palpably caring environment of small group teaching delivered by academic staff dedicated to supporting the ambitions of their students, however humble many of them may have been. The data supports the incontestable conclusion that increasing numbers of women are grasping the opportunity to spend two years growing intellectually in this sheltered environment with its scaffolded curriculum before advancing to the third year of a four year university and a bachelor's degree. They are, thus, forcing the pace, challenging once immutable customs and policies, and changing the system from within.

As to why hundreds of thousands of women are continuing to opt for two year programmes, the findings from staff and student testimony demonstrate that a powerful reason for enrolling in a junior college is the likelihood of acceptance. Indeed, to use Kinmouth's phrase, it is 'Not so much selection as seduction'. He talks of the 'a la carte admissions system' where students gain entrance, not by traditional exams but, as we have seen, 'high school recommendation, self-recommendation', and even those who take an entrance exam, 'take 3 then take the best 2' (Kinmouth 2005: 120).

Given that fee-dependent colleges are as eager to fill their empty classrooms as prospective students are to take their seats in them, this is a situation of mutual benefit in a country where education has always been a business. Moreover, students have a fairly strong conviction that there will be gainful employment at the end of two years of higher education, which is in itself an economy on what is a very expensive undertaking, though it has been clearly demonstrated that limited earning power may not justify the investment if judged purely on financial grounds. Furthermore, in a society where higher education is virtually universal there is societal pressure on 'good' parents to provide the highest level of education possible for their offspring. It is unthinkable for middle class parents to renege on this responsibility. Mothers especially, appear confident that junior college will provide a general education which will result in neither a salary nor academic profile high enough to disincentivise a prospective marriage partner, but will furnish the woman with a middle class aura, possibly even a veneer of chic internationalism, which will stand her in good stead in Japanese society.

In terms of the quality and relevance of educational experience, the junior college is seen to provide a suitable vehicle in which students can travel towards their objectives. These aims fall into two areas, employment and progression to university.

As for career choices, it appears that most students have committed to the gendered roles they are assigned or encouraged to adopt, and for which they have been socialized throughout the life course. On the other hand, as we have seen, about half the women surveyed were resolved to use their qualification to raise the stakes, entering an arena where the range of their economic outcomes could be expanded. We have seen that it is difficult for women to work themselves up from *ochakumi* (tea-fetchers) through the company ranks, but if they enter at a higher rank with a university degree they may thrive better, now that women are increasingly resisting the pressure to marry young.

It has been said that today's young women, emotionally dependent on their mothers, financially dependent on their fathers and growing up in small families, have little opportunity to experience much of the difficulties and complexities of life. Iwao (1993) goes further and suggests young Japanese women's idea of happiness seems largely made up of superficial ideas of beauty, fashion – mere surface images. She claims they populate a world of women like themselves dedicated to the pursuit of consumption and hedonism, with little confidence in their own abilities to strive for something more substantive.

My own experience of Japanese students, spanning about twenty years, has shown that as a group they can be more responsible, focused, and competent over a range of social domains than their British and American counterparts. Whilst superficially less mature, when they find themselves in challenging situations they seem to be able to unearth profound reserves of sense and responsibility. This research would not have been possible without the help of three such young women, junior college graduates (as well as graduates of UK and US universities), who acted as conduits between languages, education systems, age groups and hierarchies, with a cluster of consummate social competencies and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

Japanese society devised a higher education system for (middle class) women that served elite society's purpose well, in perpetuating and intensifying the limited range of acceptable female roles. In the same way, throughout the recent past, the British education system constantly failed working class girls by defining and reinforcing their subordination through a second class education. Furthermore, in Britain today we are experimenting with short term higher education in the form of foundation degrees and work based learning. Government and academics equally are currently preoccupied with issues around short-term higher education and the false dichotomy of vocational or academic courses. There is also a measure of anxiety concerning levels of literacy, basic skills and the general skills shortage.

In Japan it seems there are indications that short term HE may have outgrown its usefulness in the 21st century. Yet there remains a need to fulfil its original purpose, namely to inculcate in young people the skills and abilities required for them to make a positive contribution to Japanese economic performance. The junior college has come to be thought of as a last chance saloon, with students participating by default. Perhaps the most important finding of this research is that caring academics can, as this small college seems to have done, find a way to listen to their students and work with them to meet their needs.

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About the author

Currently lecturing in the School of Education, University of East London, **Patricia Walker**'s specialisms are international university students affairs and comparative higher education. Having taught at Bayero University, Nigeria, her MEd dissertation at Newcastle University analysed the development of universal primary education

(UPE) in Nigeria. Japanese interests originate from her management of language training for the children and spouses of Nissan executives in Sunderland in 1982. At Oxford Brookes University she ran a foundation course bridging Japanese students into UK HE, concurrently working for a PhD critiquing UK HEIs' international initiatives, including a case study of Japan. She spent a post-doctoral year in Japan investigating Japanese Higher education and recently conducted fieldwork at a junior college near Tokyo.