

Lifelong Learning in Japan

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Various public and private organizations in Japan offer many types of lifelong learning activities for adults. Monbushô (Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture) promotes “the creation of a lifelong learning society in which people can learn at any stage of life, can freely select and participate in opportunities for study and can have the results of their learning appropriately evaluated” (Monbushô 1996c).

The rate of adults participating in learning activities reached 48% in 1992, up from 40% in 1988. A survey by the Prime Minister’s Office concerning lifelong learning found 66% of the Japanese adult population wanted to try learning activities. The majority of adult learning covers sports and personal health (24%); hobbies and personal interests such as music, calligraphy, and flower arranging (23%); or skills useful for family life (9%). Classes to gain knowledge and skills required for work make up only 10% of the total learning activities (Monbushô 1996a, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.1; Chart I-2-1; Ch. 3, 1).

In contrast to Monbushô publications that extol the virtues of lifelong learning and to government programs and laws that promote lifelong learning, several writers on Japanese education conclude that the current system of adult education requires significant improvements: “Lifelong learning has not been successful in so far as building a learning ethic, one that prizes learning, teaches creativity, includes everyone, and is seamless” (Sawano 1997, 1). “There is no doubt that adult education has been treated as a marginal area in comparison with regular schooling” (Maehira 1994, 335). “Adult education is clearly a low priority and of low status” (Smith 1995, 108). “It is of paramount importance therefore that the . . . notion of the right to learn be allowed to take root and grow within the consciousness of each and every citizen. . . . This consciousness must in turn express itself in relentless demands for the right to freely learn and inquire. . . . the

basic orientation being described here is diametrically opposed to . . . the government-propagated discourse on lifelong education (*shôgai kyôiku*)” (Horio 1988, 272).

Japanese lifelong learning programs for adults, despite their accomplishments and admirable objectives, require some significant improvements to fully realize their goals. This essay provides an overview of the principal features and problems of the Japanese system of lifelong learning for adults. Although the term lifelong learning implies education throughout a person’s lifetime, this paper will focus only on adults after graduation from high schools or universities. Section 1 of this essay defines lifelong learning. The next section discusses significant environmental factors that have a direct effect on lifelong learning for adults. Section 3 provides a brief history of adult education since the end of World War II. Section 4 examines the principal characteristics and unique aspects of the Japanese system of lifelong learning. Section 5 focuses on some critical problems with the current system. The final section provides conclusions.

1. Defining Lifelong Learning

Educators and the general public use many different terms related to lifelong learning, such as: adult education, continuing education, social education, recurrent education, lifelong education, community education. This paper does not try to address the fine distinctions and overlaps between these different terms. However, the terms “social education” and “lifelong learning” will be described in more detail, since these are the common terms used in Japan which include adult educational activities.

Social education (*shakai kyôiku*) encompasses “organized educational activities (including those for physical education and recreation) for adults and young people other than those provided in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools or at institutions of higher education” (Monbushô 1996d). *Shakai kyôiku* was the term generally used from the late 1940s to the mid 1980s to describe adult education activities. Lifelong learning (*shôgai gakushû*) encompasses learning that takes place at all stage of life and includes both formal learning at school or other places and non-formal learning.

Consequently, lifelong learning includes all types of social education activities. Lifelong learning activities may be carried out at companies, formal schools, community centers, libraries, museums, or many other different kinds of facilities. Non-formal learning includes “knowledge gained through participation in, for example, sports activities, cultural activities, recreational activities, volunteer activities and hobbies” (Monbushô 1996c). *Shôgai gakushû* has been the term most commonly used since the mid 1980s to describe adult education activities, although the term *shakai kyôiku* is still frequently used.

Comprehensive lifelong learning systems try to address the needs of different segments of the entire population. Certain groups may require specific types of educational opportunities, such as minorities, elderly, women, or illiterate and semiliterate persons. Lifelong learning opportunities should address adults with different learning motivations, including people who desire recreation, self-improvement, vocational skills, social contact, or learning for its own sake. In summary, lifelong learning programs for adults should be based on the learning needs of individuals.

2. Environmental Factors

The following three fundamental structural changes in Japanese society have a significant and direct effect on lifelong learning for adults: aging population, economic and technological changes, and internationalization.

Aging Population

Japan’s rapidly aging society, due to increasing life expectancy and a declining birth rate, is creating a growing elderly and retired population with more time available for educational and cultural pursuits. The proportion of elderly (age 65 and over) will increase from 9% of the total Japanese population in 1980 to 17% in 2000 and 27% in 2020. The number of elderly persons will increase from 15 million in 1990 to 33 million in 2020 (Kumagai 1996, 124-7). This rapid aging of the nation’s population, unprecedented in world history, will have a major influence on future adult education needs.

Economic and Technological Changes

Significant and rapid economic and technological changes continue to create increased demand for education of adults. Lifelong employment, one of the cornerstones of the Japanese employment system, is less common than before as evidenced by the decrease in the number of full-time employees and the increase in the number of part-time and contractual employees (Makino 1997, 4). Workers in declining industries and professions must take advantage of educational opportunities to retrain for jobs in greater demand.

Businesses need a more educated and better trained work force than ever before to address scientific advances and technological improvements. Almost all workers require good computer skills to be effective in the workplace. Graduate schools, universities, and technical schools must provide training to specialized professionals to effectively deal with new and advanced technologies.

Internationalization

Japanese businesses participate extensively in the global economy, which means Japanese must travel and at times temporarily live overseas, and some foreigners come to Japan to temporarily live. Many Japanese companies have moved some of their production outside of the country in the 1980s and 1990s, which has brought about even more international contacts for Japanese people. English language ability is essential for effective participation in global business, so there is a great demand by workers of all ages to increase their English proficiency. European languages and other Asian languages such as Chinese have increased in importance to Japanese people as their business interests have expanded throughout Asia and Europe. Along with business-driven demand for adult education and training in foreign languages and cultures, Japanese people also generally have a strong personal interest in learning about people, places, and languages outside their own country.

3. Selected Events Since 1945

This section briefly covers some of the more important events affecting lifelong learning for adults since the end of World War II in 1945.

1949 Social Education Law

The Fundamental Law of Education, enacted in 1947 as a statement of the purposes and principles of Japanese education, addressed adult education in Article 7:

The state and local public bodies shall encourage home education and education carried out in places of work and elsewhere in society. The state and local public bodies shall endeavor to attain the aim of education by the establishment of such institutions as libraries, museums, citizens' public halls, etc., by the utilization of school institutions, and by other appropriate methods. (Thomas 1985, 59)

The 1949 Social Education Law defined the roles of the national, prefectural, and municipal education bodies, and it encouraged the establishment of *kôminkan* (citizens' public halls) in municipalities. Section 4 of this essay discusses in detail the roles of different government levels and the activities of *kôminkan*. The most important aspect of the 1949 Social Education Law was that it made "social education a legal right for the Japanese people, and that it is mandatory that the several levels of government provide it" (Thomas 1985, 61).

Ad Hoc Council for Educational Reform (1984-1987)

The Ad Hoc Council for Educational Reform (*rinji kyôiku shingikai or rinkyôshin*) was set up in 1984 as an ad hoc advisory committee to Prime Minister Nakasone. The Council, whose membership included prominent leaders from education and other areas, was assigned to address long-term educational reform. The Council issued many specific recommendations in four reports to the Prime Minister during three years of deliberations until 1987. The recommendations of the Council specified "education in the future should have 'lifelong learning' as its basic premise" and emphasized a transition to a lifelong

learning system away from an education system divided into school education and social education (Kawanobe 1994, 485; Makino 1997, 9).

As a result of the reports from the Ad Hoc Council for Educational Reform, the Ministry of Education (Monbushô), known for its conservatism, experienced a loss of complacency, as noted by such statements as, “We should constantly strive to reform the educational system, envisaging what our society should be in the coming years”.

Monbushô’s summary of the four reports states, “the most fundamental ideas for the current educational reform are, firstly, to carry out actively the transition to a life-long learning system, . . .” (Stephens 1981, 156).

1990 Law for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning

In 1990, the Japanese Diet enacted the Law for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning. The law prescribed such measures as: establishment of Lifelong Learning Councils at national and prefectural levels, support for local promotion of lifelong learning, provisions for development of lifelong learning in designated communities, and surveys for assessing the learning demands and needs of prefecture residents (Kawanobe 1994, 487; Makino 1997, 3-4). This law will also be discussed in the next section on “Government Structure” and in Section 5 on “Centralized Bureaucratic Control”. A White Paper published by Monbushô in 1996 reiterated and expanded on the goals found in the 1990 Law for Promotion of Lifelong Learning (1996a).

4. Principal Characteristics and Unique Aspects

Section 4 describes some noteworthy features of Japanese lifelong learning for adults. The first two parts summarize the roles of government organizations involved in providing and promoting lifelong learning. The remainder of this section discusses some distinctive programs such as the University of the Air, certification programs, and culture centers.

Government Structure

Monbushô (Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture) establishes overall national direction and policies for lifelong learning, primarily through the Lifelong Learning Council established through the 1990 Law for Promotion of Lifelong Learning. In fiscal year 1995, the national government provided over US\$ 4 billion in subsidies for local lifelong learning promotion (Sawano 1997, 7).

Lifelong learning responsibilities at the prefectural level include collecting and providing information about learning opportunities, training of local supervisors and instructors, developing programs appropriate to the needs of residents, investigating the demand for learning, evaluating the results of learning, and administering social education classes (Kawanobe 1994, 489; Makino 1997, 16). As of 1995, 33 of the 47 prefectures had established Lifelong Learning Councils as called for in the 1990 Law, and 42 prefectures had formal plans for the promotion of lifelong learning (Monbushô 1996b, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.3).

In contrast to development of lifelong learning systems at the prefectural level, there has been less systematic promotion by local governments, with many municipalities not having established lifelong learning centers and measures to encourage lifelong learning. The framework for lifelong learning at the local level, in contrast to the prefectural level, depends more on each municipality's particular environment (Kawanobe 1994, 489-490). Local governments and boards of education sponsor adult education courses and classes. About 2.9 million people attended these courses and classes in 1993 (Monbushô 1996a, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.7). Local governments also have the responsibility to establish and operate *kôminkan*, which are discussed in the following section.

Kôminkan

Kôminkan (citizens' public halls or community centers) serve as the principal organization in Japan to carry out social education activities. The official establishment of *kôminkan*, and their role in social education, dates back to the Social Education Law

of 1949, which states in Article 20 that “the object of citizens’ public halls is to perform various activities for the cause of education, science and culture by providing the people . . . with certain types of education fitted for daily life to improve their attainments, improve their health, ennoble their sentiment, elevate their cultural life, and in general, increase the social welfare of the community” (Thomas 1985, 130).

Almost every municipality has at least one *kôminkan*, and there are about 19 thousand throughout the country (Monbushô 1997a, 1). *Kôminkan* offer a wide variety of classes, hold meetings, allow residents to hold meetings, provide physical education and recreation activities, sponsor lectures and exhibitions, publish and make available books and other materials, and sponsor other types of activities. In 1992, Japanese residents used *kôminkan* 260 million times for all types of activities, which included 8.7 million people taking courses and classes (Monbushô 1996a, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.1; Chart I-2-39). The commitment and interests of *kôminkan* managers play a critical role in the types of programs offered to the public. Some *kôminkan* managers have developed special programs to serve special community interests such as elderly, handicapped, women, couples getting married, the blind, and minorities like Koreans (Thomas 1985, 86-88).

Certification Programs

Challenging certification or qualification examinations in a wide variety of subjects play a significant role in Japanese lifelong learning. Public, professional, and non-profit organizations administer these examinations which generally fall into three broad categories: (1) *professional*, such as accounting and nursing but also newer and more specialized professions like energy management, outdoor advertising, and health and exercise consulting; (2) *general*, covering a specific skill or subject such as a foreign language; and (3) *civil service*, including the Self-Defense Forces. Government ministries, such as Monbushô, or public organizations have officially approved or recognized national examinations in over 600 different areas (Tsubashi Shoten 1997, 2).

Many Japanese people of all ages participate in certification examination programs. Just for the 23 Monbushô-approved proficiency examinations, 5.5 million persons participated in 1995, sharply up from 3.5 million participants in 1990. About 2.8 million persons passed the examinations, with the highest levels being in practical English (1.7 million), calligraphy (170 thousand), and secretarial skills (170 thousand) (Monbushô 1996a, Chart I-2-45; Ch. 2, Sec. 3.1). The proficiency examination in kanji (Chinese characters) has also experienced spectacular growth and will offer in 1998 the first examination after having the program officially approved by Monbushô. Kanji proficiency test applicants increased from 240 thousand in 1994 to 850 thousand in 1997 (ALC 1998, 122).

Many certification programs give examinations at different levels, and passing an examination at the top level demonstrates a true level of excellence because of the very low passing rates. For example, only 4% of applicants pass the Level 1 Practical English Proficiency Test, which is roughly the equivalent of English ability at the college-graduate level. A few of the other certification examinations with passing rates under 15% at the top level include secretarial skills, abacus, bookkeeping, calligraphy, retailing, and business English (Tsubashi Shoten 1997, 334-6, 340, 343-4, 354-5, 371).

Proficiency examinations have the potential to help counteract the undue importance placed by Japanese people on previous academic background such as the prestige of the university attended. These examinations require the demonstration of objectively verifiable knowledge and skills, regardless of previous formal schooling. They also provide an incentive for university students to study diligently to pass challenging certification examinations related to the profession they want to enter. However, a great number of graduating students go directly into companies where they place little value on professional certifications except in limited fields such as law and public accounting. Business and government leader attitudes, which place excessive value on the ranking of universities that generally can be entered only by high scores on the

university entrance examination, must change before the true value of certification programs will be recognized throughout Japanese society.

Other Distinctive Features

The Japanese lifelong learning system for adults has several other distinctive aspects, three of which are discussed below: University of the Air, on-the-job training by businesses, and private companies offering adult education.

University of the Air

In 1985, the University of the Air began to admit students without the requirement of an entrance examination. Students receive printed course materials, which are supplemented by radio and television broadcasts. The principal purposes of the university include: (1) to provide university-level education for workers, including women working at home; (2) to ensure a flexible opportunity for university education by allowing students to take single courses and to research specific subjects; and (3) to improve university education in Japan by promoting the interchangeable credit system between existing universities (Moro'oka 1989, 421; Monbushô 1996b, Ch. 2, Sec. 3.5).

The University has already graduated over 8 thousand persons and has an extremely varied student population of 62 thousand, including elderly people, workers, and housewives. Currently, the University of the Air only covers part of the Kanto region (Tokyo and surrounding prefectures), but it plans to expand coverage nationwide via broadcasting satellites. When nationwide coverage has been implemented, the student population is expected to increase to over 200 thousand (Monbushô 1996b, Ch. 2, Sec. 3.5; 1995, Ch. 2, Sec. 3.1).

Business Support

Japanese companies provide employees with extensive on-the-job vocational training with very specific objectives. Private industry plays the dominant role in the training of workers and supports a minimum of formal in-house training and outside seminars and courses (Smith 1995, 108). Only 20% of Japanese companies have a

policy to provide employees with paid time off for outside training classes, and only 6% of the workers sent for outside training go to universities or technical schools. Instead, businesses rely upon industry organizations (74%, survey allows for multiple answers per worker), commercial educational providers (46%), parent and affiliated companies (44%), and equipment makers (43%) for their outside training needs (Monbushô 1996a, Charts I-2-30, I-2-41).

Private Enterprises

Private sector educational organizations, both for-profit and non-profit, play a key role in the education and training of Japanese adults. These include proprietary vocational schools, some with many branches throughout the country, covering fields such as computers and business. Commercial correspondence schools, YMCAs, YWCAs, temples, churches, foreign language schools, learning circles, and culture centers also offer many opportunities for lifelong learning.

Culture centers offer a great variety of courses and often use famous experts and university professors as instructors and lecturers. Newspaper publishers, broadcasting companies, department stores, and other businesses operate culture centers that offer classes in hobbies, health, sports, and liberal education (Moro'oka 1989, 421). Companies run the culture centers to make money, and participants are expected to spend much more money than government-sponsored (e.g., *kôminkan*) classes. In 1993, over 1.9 million persons participated in culture center classes (Monbushô 1996a, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.3, 1.7).

5. Problems

Japan has strong governmental support for lifelong learning, and adults have many opportunities to participate in various educational activities. However, some significant problems still exist in Japan's lifelong learning system for adults. This section analyzes three of the most critical issues: lack of adult participation in higher education, Japanese society's undue emphasis on a person's prior formal academic career, and Monbushô's centralized bureaucratic direction and control of lifelong learning.

Higher Education

Very few Japanese adults attend university courses at either the undergraduate or graduate level, and universities in general provide few opportunities for adults to participate in higher education. The university student population is highly stratified by age, and it is rare for students outside ages 18 to 22 to attend university classes (Smith 1995, 107). Monbushô statistics show that in 1995 only 4,189 adult students were admitted to undergraduate degree programs and 4,889 to graduate degree programs (1996a, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.7). These numbers are quite small when compared to a total population in Japan of about 125 million.

Japanese universities have been very inaccessible to adults, both for degree programs and even for taking individual classes apart from a degree program. Universities in Japan generally provide very limited transfer of previous credits earned at other universities or even in other departments at the same university, as the following example shows:

Japanese students are not accepted into a university and then allowed to choose a major. Rather, they are accepted for a certain major in a certain university. Students may not change majors or transfer to another university without taking another entrance examination. My husband was a sophomore studying math when his university started a medical school. In order to change his major to medicine, he had to quit school and take a new entrance exam. After passing the exam, he started school as a freshman again, and none of the credits from his previous two years were transferable. (Goya 1993, 127)

This type of inflexibility has greatly hindered the pursuit of higher education by adults. The number of universities permitting students to take single courses without entering a degree program has recently grown quite rapidly, from 116 in 1992 to 358 in 1994, which represents over half the universities in Japan. However, the number of students involved had reached only 10 thousand in 1994 (excluding University of the Air students), but this represented a five-fold increase from two years before (Monbushô 1996a, Chart I-2-19).

Businesses provide almost no support to employees to continue their education in institutions of higher learning. Japanese companies do not underwrite university tuition, and employees tend to enter universities on an individual basis for evening or weekend classes (Kawanobe 1994, 491; Smith 1995, 108). This lack of support compares quite unfavorably to large American companies such as United Technologies, which provides 100% paid tuition to any employee taking an undergraduate or graduate degree, allows time off from work to study up to three hours a week, and gives shares of common stock upon graduation. Such generous educational assistance has resulted in 11 thousand out of its 72 thousand total U.S. employees (about 15%) currently studying for degrees (United Technologies 1998; 1997, 3, 21).

The establishment of the University of the Air in 1985 increased accessibility of higher education to adults, and Monbushô is taking some other limited steps to encourage greater participation of adults in university education. For example, in 1991 universities were allowed to offer credit for study at educational institutions other than universities if equivalent to university-level study. Now some students can get credits for courses at professional training colleges or for passing Monbushô-approved proficiency tests such as the Practical English Proficiency Test (Monbushô 1995, Ch. 2, Sec. 1.5). Some graduate schools are introducing more flexibility to encourage adult participation, such as special selection procedures, special register systems to grant credits for part-time study, evening graduate schools, and courses open to the general public (Monbushô 1995, Ch. 2, Sec. 2.2; 1997b, 5).

Notwithstanding the limited changes described above, much more needs to be done to provide opportunities for university study to adults by allowing more flexibility to earn and transfer credits for degrees. However, Monbushô does not appear to be vigorously taking leadership to quickly make significant changes to the existing system. Their 1997 Program for Educational Reform, which provides detailed recommendations on a wide range of educational issues, and their 1995 Report on Remaking Universities

contain only limited ideas on how to substantially increase the numbers of adults participating in higher education.

Academic Career Society

Japan's society places great emphasis on a person's prior academic career (called *gakureki shakai* in Japanese or "academic career society"). Japanese tend to overemphasize the importance of formal primary and secondary schooling, and the prestige of the university a person attends usually receives excessive weight in hiring decisions for good jobs within business and government. This leads to intense competition for students to do well on entrance examinations to get into the best universities. Despite promotion of lifelong learning by the government, the majority of Japanese society continues to distinguish between two distinct stages in life: the learning stage prior to early adulthood and the working stage after university or high school graduation (Ogisu-Kamiya 1997, 11).

The Japanese school system does not sufficiently prepare children for learning throughout life. The schools tend to teach reactive learning skills, which are required to succeed on the competitive university and high school entrance examinations (Ogisu-Kamiya 1997, 10). Primary and secondary schools require improvements to create more of an environment that will cultivate in children the ability and desire for independent learning, critical thinking, and creativity. The excessive value placed by society on entrance examinations leads to undue stress on young people and causes students to focus their academic efforts exclusively on subjects and material covered by examinations. A 1994 Monbushô survey showed a majority of parents believe the excessive competition of entrance examinations has a negative influence on the development of children, and the many children attending private cram schools (*juku*) miss other important experiences related to play, community activities, and general living (Sawano 1997, 13). Many students relax once they reach the university level and do not learn as much as they could, because the ranking of the university attended has much more influence on job prospects than how much and what they learn there.

The Japanese government's promotion of a lifelong learning society should over time counteract today's academic career society with its focus on a person's previous formal school career. Although significant changes have been very slow since the mid 1980s, when lifelong learning started to be actively promoted, improvements should result as adults are provided complete access to flexible educational opportunities and as they receive appropriate recognition for their skills and knowledge regardless of where they were acquired.

Centralized Bureaucratic Control

Monbushô's centralized bureaucratic direction and control of lifelong learning causes problems and inefficiencies. This can be observed in several areas. Local governments are typically eager to get whatever funding available with little regard as to feasibility and effectiveness of lifelong learning projects. Most prefectures have trained instructors and established databases that list available volunteer teachers, but many complain that no one asks them to lead programs or classes. Monbushô says it supports communication from citizens for whom the lifelong learning system provides benefits, but they do not mention how citizens will have direct input. (Makino 1997, 13; Sawano 1997, 7-8)

The 1990 Law for Promotion of Lifelong Learning shifted several responsibilities related to adult education from the local boards of education to the prefectural level. This shift of responsibilities leads to less self-government and local autonomy. As part of the establishment of a lifelong learning system, Monbushô now considers educational activities to include such things as hobbies, sports, volunteer activities, recreational activities, and cultural activities. This results in the national government trying to intervene and control the entire scope of learning, including many areas usually considered personal and private (Makino 1997, 12, 17).

Several factors work against and weaken the negative effects of centralized bureaucratic control of lifelong education. If people truly desire to learn something, they usually will find the way to participate in activities to acquire the desired knowledge or

skills. Generally, a sufficient level of demand from learners will lead to some organization providing the demanded training or activity. Private enterprises and entrepreneurial-type individuals employed in local government or *kôminkan* will develop new classes and activities to meet the learning requirements of local residents. The success of local lifelong learning programs many times depends on the involvement of individuals and on the initiative, creativity, and flexibility of managers and administrators of organizations that provide educational opportunities to adults.

6. Conclusions

Several key conclusions can be reached from this essay's analysis of Japanese lifelong learning for adults:

- Japan has strong laws and policies supporting the promotion of a lifelong learning society and the provision of a wide variety of adult educational activities. However, the actual state of lifelong learning for adults falls far short of Monbushô's goals.
- The lifelong learning system has several notable strengths such as *kôminkan*, a wide variety of challenging certification programs, on-the-job training by businesses, the University of the Air, and private enterprises that provide educational activities to adults.
- The deep-seated attitude of most Japanese people which overemphasizes a person's prior academic career will probably not change quickly. If the Government continues to strongly support lifelong learning and programs to recognize a person's knowledge and skills regardless of where learned, the emphasis on prior formal schooling should eventually decrease.
- Very few adults take university courses or participate in degree programs. Despite some recent limited improvements, universities generally remain inaccessible to adults and inflexible in the ways to earn and transfer credits. Business support hardly exists

for employee attendance at universities. The current system still requires many improvements to provide adults satisfactory opportunities for higher education.

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