

Original Article

What Steps can Small Private Schools Take to Survive? — A Case for Breaking with Tradition.

Richard J. Lemmer

Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, Okayama 701-0197, Japan

This paper examines enrollment problems facing institutes of higher learning in Japan. It focuses primarily on two-year junior colleges illustrating current conditions while offering suggestions for increasing the number of students. The focus is on recruiting of non-traditional students to help compensate for the decrease in the number of recent high school graduates in Japan.

Key Words: Non-traditional students, recruiting, international students, adult learners, enrollment

The phenomenon of the rapid rise of higher education in postwar Japan is one which has rarely been equaled. Factors which contributed to this growth were the first and second baby booms, the rise of Japan's economy and businesses, increased personal wealth, and the principle of "equality of opportunity" strongly recommended by the American occupation forces. The number of students enrolled in two-year colleges alone increased from 77,885 in 1955 to a peak of 530,294 in 1993. The rise in the number of junior colleges mirrored the increase of students as these institutions grew in number from 264 in 1955 to 598 in 1996. Since reaching their respective peaks in the mid-1990s, the numbers of both students and junior colleges have been in a steady and dramatic decline. Government figures for 2005 show a total enrollment of 219,355 for Japan's junior colleges. The last time enrollment was at this level was in the 1960s. Clearly, this is a time of crisis for junior colleges in Japan.

What is the cause of this decline? There are currently a number of reasons contributing to the decline in enrollment, but they all stem from the primary one, the end of the second baby boom. This situation was easy to predict, yet for the most part ignored until its impact had already negatively affected many schools. With increasingly fewer 18-year olds graduating from high school the number of applicants to two and four-year schools will continue to decline. It is projected that student numbers will fall to 1,183,000 by 2012. This marks a 42.3% decrease over a twenty year period. Accordingly, junior colleges and four-year universities are facing critical decisions which will affect their very survival. Further exacerbating this problem is the fact that the vast majority of two and four-year students (92% and 73% respectively in 1999) are enrolled in private schools. According to Kinmoth (2005) one important distinction between American and Japanese private junior colleges is the fact that Japanese schools rely on tuition to pay for most operating expenses and major expenditures. Therefore, with declining enrollments, many institutions are facing extreme financial problems that in some cases have already resulted in debts, closures and bankruptcy. With little hope of endowments or alumni funding in

Corresponding author:
Richard J. Lemmer
Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, 83, Niwase,
Okayama 701-0197, Japan
Tel & Fax; +81 86 293 1100

Japan, the situation is both dire and evident as the number of junior colleges operating in Japan fell from 596 in 1995 to 488 in 2005, an 18 % decrease.

Given the fact that the population of 18 year olds is not about to expand in the foreseeable future, immediate action is needed to ensure the survival of existing schools. It is the intent of this paper to examine conditions and evaluate existing methods for recruiting students and to offer suggestions, which if adopted, may allow more schools to not only weather the current crisis, but to flourish in the future in spite of there being fewer high school graduates. These suggestions, while not new, to date have only been implemented on a modest scale, if at all.

Accompanying the decline in student numbers there have been relaxations of some rules by the the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Transfers from junior college to four-year schools and between schools, while not yet commonplace, are now permitted. There are a number of alternate means of entering colleges and universities that are replacing the traditional "entrance exam hell", thus making recruitment efforts among schools even more competitive. One such method is admission by recommendation. Until 2000 those admitted in this fashion had been limited to 50 % of all junior college students. It has now been expanded so that in theory, 100 %, the entire first year class, could be composed of students admitted by recommendation. Within this framework, rules have been loosened to include self-recommendation from prospective students. One school in Shikoku has even accepted recommendations by current students to stave off closure (Kinmonth, 2005). Most schools also offer "admissions office entrance exams" (AO) which allow prospective students to sit for an interview with faculty members of the department they wish to attend. Such interviews are preceded by a written essay explaining why the student wishes to join the particular department and is often merely a perfunctory attempt at screening. At some schools even the requirements for the individual institution's entrance examination have been diluted. Students may sit for a paper test in whatever field that they feel most competent in, regardless of which department they actually plan to enter. Even with such relaxations private school enrollment continues to suffer.

The number of openings for four-year universities equaled the number of high school graduates for the first time in 2008, resulting in what amounts to 'open admissions'. This demographic represents an added pressure for junior colleges as many students who would have opted to attend a two-year school because of lower academic performance in high school can now be accepted to a university as those schools scramble to fill their allotted quotas. If a school falls below 50 % of its approved quota, it could have its government subsidies suspended (Akabayashi, 2006). One serious effect of the de facto 'open admissions' practice is that a growing number students entering tertiary education are in need of remedial studies in order to meet the demands of university and junior college classes. This places new burdens on schools as they must alter their curriculum and devise new courses to assist these students in overcoming their academic deficiencies. A positive effect is that more students than ever are opting to pursue post-secondary education yet their presence cannot counter the overall decline in the number potential students.

What new directions do the academic institutions need to embark upon in order to remain solvent and continue to contribute to society by graduating trained and motivated individuals who are competent in their chosen field? How this issue is resolved is vital to the future of higher education in Japan.

It is apparent that the existing system is in urgent need of restructuring. Merely adhering to the 'time tested' routines in recruiting and establishing curricula is no longer sufficient. By issuing the 2004 reforms in education, MEXT has taken unprecedented steps to change and improve higher education in Japan. The scope of this action has been compared to the introduction of western elements into the Japanese education system during the Meiji Restoration and the 'Americanization' of education after World War II (Kelly, 1999). Much of the reform addresses the privatization of public universities, both national and local, and the potential mergers between these institutions and private schools. More autonomy is provided to schools in determining new policies from teacher contracts to courses offered. Other striking changes at the start of the 21st century include the introduction of outside evaluation of schools, increased student evaluation of teachers, and attempts to gain greater international

recognition for Japanese universities. In addition, requirements for establishing four-year degree programs as junior college departments restructure into university level schools have been made easier. All these policy changes deserve attention and most changes have been welcomed, but questions remain as to whether the changes will positively impact enrollment and ultimately the continued solvency of schools as a growing number of them fail to meet enrollment quotas (*teiin*). As of 2006, 160 of 542 four-year schools failed to meet their quotas and two-year schools fared even worse. By early 2002, 58 % of private junior colleges had fallen short of their quotas (Walker, 2006)

What then are the options now available to schools to attain higher enrollment? What are schools doing now to increase enrollment? Are they succeeding? If so, can that success be sustained given the continuing decrease in the number of high school graduates? There have been numerous news reports of schools offering students amenities that have little or nothing to do with education and learning. Golf courses, swimming pools, health spas, gourmet restaurants, convenience and fast food shops, to name a few, have been established on various campuses to help induce students to attend these schools (McNeil, 2008). Promotions and giveaways, including 'free' semester abroad programs and 'free' laptop computers have been tried. University teachers are making more visits to high schools, groups of high school students are visiting university campuses with increasing frequency and we are witnessing an expansion of 'open campus' days. Schools are continually renaming classes and courses to give them trendier and more appealing titles only to find dissatisfied students who soon discover such changes are merely cosmetic while classes and teaching practices remain essentially the same. Questions concerning the quality of teaching also continue to be raised and the lower ranked the institution, the more severe the reduction in student numbers. On a more positive note, many junior colleges have established successful relationships with schools in other countries due to the desire of many Japanese students to experience life abroad in a safe and quality academic environment (Walker, 2003).

So, what more can the troubled schools do? One solution with a high probability of success is to

attract non-traditional students. It makes little sense for schools to continue to waste valuable time and resources engaging in strong competition with each other while searching for nonexistent students. This is particularly true in the case of junior colleges. It was the non-traditional student who saved, and was responsible for the boom in higher education in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (Kelly, 1998). In this article the term non-standard student refers to two basic groups, adult or returning learners and international students.

Internationalization is a nebulous term that for some time has been bandied about for a variety of purposes. It is one means of survival for Japanese junior colleges. What is the role of the international student in Japan? Since 1983 the government has tried various policies and incentives to incorporate a larger number of foreign students into the Japanese higher education system (Horie, 2002). In the 1990s there was an ambitious plan for international student enrollment to reach 100,000 by the year 2000. While the target was not met until 2003, it still represents a dramatic influx of foreign students. The vast majority of these students were from three countries, China (66.2 %), South Korea (12.8 %), and Taiwan (3.6 %). By May 2005 Asian students comprised 93.3 % of all international students in Japan (JASSO, 2006).

To help advance its goal of improving the number of foreign students the government has introduced a number of reforms to help stimulate further recruitment. In order for a university to receive approval for establishment of a new faculty or department it must, among other requirements, include a predetermined percentage of foreign students. This provides an added incentive for schools to recruit international students. In 2000 the government relaxed regulations regarding the issuance of student visas and part-time employment for foreign students to help increase applicants and make it more financially viable for students from less developed countries to attend school in Japan. No doubt these measures aided in bringing the total number of international students above the 100,000 mark.

Japan's historical reticence to accept foreigners is well documented (Chapple, 2004), but given the continuing enrollment slump and aging population such policies, and the attitudes which underlie them, can

no longer be tolerated, if for no other reason than they are inherently impractical and self-defeating. Just as many Japanese students wish to experience life in other countries, so too, do growing numbers of those from abroad desire to study in Japan. Many come from societies where the educational demand can no longer meet the available supply as populations rise and workplaces require more college educated employees. In addition they see Japan as able to provide a higher quality learning experience than found in their native country. These factors should compel struggling schools in Japan to aggressively seek out more international students. In the short term, most will continue to come from Asia due to proximity and a shared cultural background grounded in the philosophy of Confucius. It is not realistic to expect an influx of North American or European students due to the language barrier and the fact that only three Japanese universities rank in the top 100 of the world. A number of Japanese universities are taking steps to create greater diversity by offering all classes, with the exception of Japanese language classes, in English. They are also seeking foreign faculty in disciplines other than language teaching. Examples of such schools are Waseda University, Asia Pacific University and Tokyo University which have experienced an increase in international students in part due to classes being taught in English.

In order for junior colleges to attract more international students it is not necessary to conduct lessons only in English. Foreign students who desire to study in Japan are very interested in learning Japanese and becoming involved in Japanese culture. It would be prudent to employ Japanese language teachers for JFL lessons to improve the quality of learning for these students. Any costs would be more than offset by the tuition paid by these students. In fact, if numbers warrant it, schools could open small centers for Japanese studies where students would attend classes until proficient enough in Japanese to be comfortable in an academic classroom environment. These centers open a new avenue for increased revenues. A select number of universities already offer foreign graduate students this opportunity.

Admittance of foreign students should not be viewed only as an opportunity to expose the culture and richness of Japan to outsiders, but as an opportunity for our Japanese students to learn more about

the world around them. Our students are eager to learn the languages and cultural practices of their regional neighbors. This cross-cultural sharing and learning is one objective of the government's quest for internationalization. It can be viewed as a means of maintaining peaceful and productive relationships, while at the same time strengthening economic ties between nations.

Considering the cultural and financial advantages of accepting more foreign students it is troublesome that much of the publicity surrounding international students has been negative. There have been headlines and overblown stories concerning foreign students who leave school, overstay their visas, work illegally and resort to more serious crimes. Such incidents overshadow the many positive contributions of international students and reinforce negative stereotypes. Strong friendships and bonds formed with Japanese students, employers and neighbors far outweigh the indiscretions of a few. And while true that lack of Japanese language ability can create difficulties, this is not an insurmountable problem. By attending classes and working together with international students our own students' lives are enriched and the coffers of the schools do not go empty. It is a win-win situation which should be explored and implemented by more schools. Moreover, the government hopes to raise the number of foreign students to 300,000 by the year 2020 and in a change of policy wants to help these students find employment in Japan after graduation (AP, 2008). Why not start now to make this target a reality even earlier than 2020?

There is another more accessible non-traditional student awaiting inclusion into the higher education system. This is the Japanese adult learner. In a country where the population is rapidly aging it would seem obvious that these learners could be of great benefit not only in helping preserve existing educational institutions, but in transforming and expanding them for a brighter future. Greater inclusion of adult learners would also increase the chances of success for the MEXT agenda for lifelong learning.

The concept of lifelong learning (*shogai gakushu*) is not new to Japan. Since the late 1940s there has been a comprehensive system in place for what is termed social education (*shakai kyoiku*). The majority

of lifelong learning until recently has been focused on non-formal learning that takes place at community centers, companies, libraries, schools and other locations. According to the Monbusho (1996) such learning encompasses "knowledge gained through participation in, for example, sports activities, volunteer activities, and hobbies." Noticeably absent from the realm of lifelong learning in Japan is the role of higher education.

The number of government reports on lifelong learning in the past 15 years is testament to the importance which Tokyo places on this area of education. Although a number of large universities have enacted special admittance procedures for adult learners, few have aggressively sought such students, nor have they been flexible enough in their policies to accommodate them. Adult learners encompass a variety of types. Housewives whose children have grown and now have the time to pursue studies they may have abandoned or not had time for earlier in life, employees who need to acquire new skills to remain competitive in the constantly changing labor market, retirees (third-age learners) who have the time and interest to study, and adults who wish to attend graduate school for further professional development or to acquire a second area of expertise are among those comprising this segment of the population.

Until recently the structural barriers made it difficult for adults to study at the tertiary level in Japan. According to Schuetze & Slowey (2002), four areas need to be addressed for successful implementation of adult education programs. They are (1) flexible access, (2) mode of study, (3) financial assistance, and (4) continuing educational opportunities. In their comparative study of lifelong learning in ten industrialized countries, Japan ranked low in all four areas. With a little effort and a sincere desire to integrate adult learners into higher education these obstacles can be overcome. In fact a number of larger institutions have recently begun on such a path.

Of primary importance is the recognition that the needs of the adult learner are different from those of recent high school graduates and should be recognized and treated accordingly by both administration and faculty. There are a number of steps that should be considered to increase the number of adult learners while making their learning experience more

meaningful. Flexible scheduling including evening, Saturday, and distance or hybrid classes can help increase the number of adult students. New admission policies that take into account life experience and prior formal education should be adopted. Allowing for more students to attend classes for credit without participating in a specific degree program would boost enrollment. Seeking part-time students and embracing them as part of the learning community would help diversify the student body and make the university environment more representative of the society in which it exists.

In most developed countries the inclusion of adult learners has led to a more heterogeneous student body in terms of social, family and educational backgrounds, gender, age and life-situation (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Including adult learners in the school community aides traditional learners as they interact with a greater variety of people, learn from their varied experiences and come to realize how lifelong learning is an integral part of their life. Adult learners are generally more highly motivated and possess better study and time management skills which traditional students observe and incorporate into their routines. Their function as role models cannot be underestimated (Lemmer, 2003). These adult learners are a valuable asset to colleges and universities both financially and educationally and now more than ever before need to be recognized and welcomed into higher education.

Both sets of non-traditional students pose different problems for schools as they now exist. Overcoming these should not, however, be viewed as negatives but opportunities for financial, intellectual and institutional growth. If learning is constructed through a shared social experience as espoused by Vigotsky, what better environment could there be for learners than a truly integrated classroom consisting of traditional students, adult learners and international students? It certainly appears that a future that fails to integrate non-traditional students will be one of continuing school failures and fewer choices and opportunities for all members of society. This article does not advocate abandoning efforts to attract traditional students, but rather urges a three-pronged approach to future recruiting efforts by seeking traditional, international and adult students with equal enthusiasm. By enacting this approach

schools can align their policies with the stated goals of the government while offering opportunities to a larger number of learners. Let us hope that the administrators in decision making positions are able to recognize the need for more open and creative solutions before the current situation becomes irreversible.

*All enrollment and school statistics were retrieved from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) website unless otherwise cited. <<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/staist/index11.htm>>

References

1. Akabayashi H: Private universities and government policy in Japan. *International Higher Education* (2006) **42**. Winter 2006.
2. Associated Press: Japan aims to more than double the number of foreign students by 2020. Tokyo. 7/29/2008.
3. Brownell G and Kashiwagi A: Universities are competing to attract the best, brightest and richest students. *Newsweek* (Atlantic Edition) (2006) **148** 8/9.
4. Chapple J: Dilemma posed by Japan's population decline. *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. (2004) October 18, 2004. retrieved September 30, 2008 from <http://www.japanstudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/Chapple.html>
5. Goodman R: W(h)ither the Japanese university? An introduction to the 2004 higher education reforms in Japan; in *The 'Big Bang' in Japanese Higher Education: The 2004 reforms and the Dynamics of Change*. Eades, Goodman & Hada eds, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne (2005) pp 1-31.
6. Horie M: The internationalization of higher education in Japan in the 1990s: A reconsideration. *Higher Education* (2002) **42** pp 65-84.
7. Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO): International students in Japan. December 13, 2006 retrieved October 1, 2008 from http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl_student/data06_e.html
8. Kelly C: The coming education boom in Japan. Japanese Society, Japanese Society Research Institute. Tsukuba University (1999) **3** retrieved October 2, 2008 from <http://www.osaka-gu.ac.jp/php/kelly/papers/boom.html>
9. Kelly C: Adult education: Do trends in America foreshadow trends in Japan? *The Language Teacher* (1998) **22** 4.
10. Kinmonth HK: From selection to seduction: The impact of demographic change on private higher education in Japan; in *The 'Big Bang' in Japanese Higher Education: The 2004 reforms and the Dynamics of Change*. Eades, Goodman & Hada eds, Trans-Pacific Press, Melbourne (2005) pp 106-135.
11. Lemmer R: Performance analysis for a junior college English department. (2003) (unpublished).
12. McNeill D: Facing enrollment crisis, Japanese universities fight to attract students. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) **54** 44.
13. Schuetze H and Slowey M: Participation and exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education. *Higher Education* (2002) **44** pp 309-327.
14. Walker P: Teachers and tea-fetchers — What the future holds in store for Japan's junior college graduates: female student perceptions of status, purpose, and value of a junior college education. *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (2006). December 7, 2006. retrieved October 2, 2008 from <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2006/Walker.html>
15. Walker P: Internationalizing Japanese higher education: Reforming the system or repositioning the product? in *The 'Big Bang' in Japanese Higher Education: The 2004 reforms and the Dynamics of Change*. Eades, Goodman & Hada eds, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne (2005) pp 165-182.

Accepted March 30, 2008.