Feature Article

Trends in Access to Higher Education in Japan

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The Japanese higher education system faces ever-growing challenges as demographic shifts have moved the country from "mass" to "universal" access to higher education. As universities compete for a shrinking pool of potential students to fill seats in a still-growing national higher education system, institutions find themselves under pressure to put in place policies which relax acceptance and retention standards in order to remain financially viable. These policies have led to a number of changes across the Japanese higher education system in terms of the readiness of incoming students for the rigors of university-level study, and in their attitudes towards that study. These demographic trends, and the pressures they tend to put on university-level recruitment and retention policy, have profound effects on post-secondary education in this country. These shifts are already changing what university-level educators teach, who has access to higher education, and how educators will need to approach students who enter university from non-traditional backgrounds. Both universities and educators will be forced to reevaluate their fundamental ideas about higher education in order to remain competitive and viable.

I have been investigating the topic of how demographic changes are affecting Japanese higher education for only a few years, but even in this short time I have often found myself struck by the degree to which educators in Japan, and in particular foreign educators in Japan, are unaware of the issues I will describe in this paper. This is particularly troubling because, as I hope to describe, the issues surrounding access to higher education in this country have profound ramifications for our jobs as educators. As these demographic shifts continue, university-level educators will be called to prepare our students for success at university, be it through study skills, time-management skills, or even softer interpersonal skills that our students might lack. This might be in purpose-built remedial classes,

but as more students come to us with less of this sort of preparation, it will more likely become a part of teaching in every class. This is in contrast to what many of us may have experienced as undergraduates in quite different contexts, where professors could afford to take a hard-line "sink or swim" stance that we simply do not have the luxury to take. While this change will necessarily encompass all university-level instructors in this country, Japanese or foreign, the linguistic and social isolation many foreign instructors face here may well leave many with less direct support than they might like, requiring them to take some initiative in implementing these changes in their own practice.

Demographic Trends

Readers will be well aware that Japan is an aging society; it is expected that by 2025 more than one-third of the total population will be 65 or older (Kalache, Barreto, & Keller, 2005). The expected effects of this demographic shift on the Japanese higher education system are every bit as profound as those we are seeing in other areas.

Between 1990 and 2010, the number of 18-year-olds in this country fell by nearly 40%, from just over 2 million to about 1.2 million individuals (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2014). Over the same period, the number of students entering four-year universities increased by nearly 15%, from about 540,000 to 620,000, according to a report from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2012). In a short twenty years, the number of seats for new students in four-year universities has climbed from about 25% of the total 18-year-old population to more than half; by way of comparison, about 30% of the age cohort in the United States (slightly less in the UK) is enrolled in 4-year higher education institutions (HEIs) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The number of young people entering higher education in Japan rises to more than 60% if we consider the roughly 130,000 students admitted to 2-year junior and technical colleges in 2010.

As educators, of course, most of us are no doubt pleased to hear that more young people are being afforded the chance to go to university. Surely, the

chance to attend university is a benefit, which should be extended to all people who want it. Indeed, in the best of all possible worlds, this would be the case; but the speed at which these changes have occurred has left much of the Japanese higher education system spinning, struggling to meet the new needs of a rapidly-changing student body. Indeed, this is a common phenomenon, seen in many contexts where access to higher education changes, especially when it changes rapidly.

University in a High-Access Setting

Martin Trow (Burrage, 2010) wrote extensively about the American higher education context beginning in the mid-1970s, and described some general trends in access to higher education, which describe the changes in the Japanese context in general terms. Most important for this discussion is the concept of "universal" access to higher education—something of a misnomer, as Trow reckoned that universal access began at around 50% access to higher education. Fundamentally, however, universal access describes a situation in which a space in the higher education system exists for every person who wants one; the market is saturated. Trow describes some general trends we can expect to see in a universal-access market, which I will outline below; the rest of this section gives a general overview of his theories and observations regarding increased access to higher education.

First, as the potential pool of students shrinks relative to the number of seats available in a system of higher education, competition between institutions increases. Education becomes a commodity, and universities find themselves more and more accountable to market forces. As recruitment becomes more competitive, individual institutions also become more accountable to stakeholders and potential stakeholders; universities must be more and more ready to show potential students and their parents exactly how an education can help them, and to do so in a competitive way. Thanks to these market pressures, universities are administrated as businesses, with professional administrators who are more removed from the university faculty in outlook.

Somewhat ironically, this increased competition tends to lead to increased

stratification between high-prestige and low-prestige institutions in a higher education market with wide access to higher education. To retain recruitment numbers, higher-prestige institutions are forced to "recruit down," taking in students who would have attended lower-prestige universities in a less-saturated market. This continues down the prestige chain, until institutions quite low on the prestige scale will be recruiting students who in the past would not have been afforded the chance to attend university at all. The net result of this is that high-prestige institutions may see very little net effect on the character of their incoming students, while low-prestige institutions find themselves having to deal with students who have very little preparation for university-level study, whether academic or social (Huang, 2012; Yonezawa & Kim, 2008).

Finally, a universal-access market sees a shift in how higher education is seen in the wider society. At the lowest levels of access, "elite" in Trow's terminology, access to higher education is seen as a privilege of the rich and powerful. As access grows towards Trow's "mass access" level, a university education is seen less as a privilege and more as a right—something that anyone with appropriate levels of intelligence or talent should be given the opportunity to take advantage of. At the universal level, however, higher education is seen more as a necessity; a university-level education is needed to get ahead in society. This change in perception of higher education brings with it a change in how students approach their educations. In an elite system, students are aware that the primary purpose of a university education is to prepare them as members of the social elite; in some sense, what is learned is less important than the setting, the shared paradigm, and the social connections higher education provides. But in a universal system, students have a strong expectation that a university education will give them a set of concrete skills to apply to their professional lives after graduation; there is less patience for coursework that cannot be seen as directly applicable to life after university.

The Japanese Context: Impact on Policy

Thus, we can see that the Japanese higher education system as a whole—both private and public—faces a demographic crunch: fewer students and more seats

to fill. This leaves individual institutions with two basic options, both of which they must pursue to succeed. First, get a larger share of the available students (to simply keep student numbers constant means recruiting a larger percentage share of the total number of 18-year-olds), and second, keep those students in the system (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). Failure to do either of these in the current economic climate will likely leave a university with a rapidly-shrinking student body and eventual contraction or outright economic failure.

Universities have two primary avenues for increasing recruitment: making the school more attractive to potential students, and recruiting a wider variety of students. Making the school more attractive can take many forms; the most obvious, perhaps, is the process of adding and improving facilities and beautifying campuses. We can certainly see this process at universities across Japan today, what might be described as the "climbing wall effect" in the American context (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011), where universities feel pressure to have the newest and most-popular facilities (the classic example being a climbing wall) to make themselves attractive to potential students. While this trend brings with it the same dangers which Altbach, Gumport and Berdahl (2011) described in terms of a dropping percentage of university expenditure on education, it cannot be denied that a beautiful campus with attractive facilities helps to bring in new students in a competitive environment.

More difficult to see, especially for the professionally and socially isolated foreign instructor in the Japanese setting, is the use of admissions, graduation, and job placement data as a recruitment tool. This means that not only is this data often made public, but that the university will find itself under a great deal of pressure to make these statistics as attractive as possible. Thus at the institutional level, most universities will want high admissions rates, graduation rates, and job placement rates, which often means relaxed standards for entrance and graduation, thus affecting the quality of incoming students and expectations in the classroom (Huang, 2012; Yonezawa & Kim, 2008). As discussed previously, these effects will be felt most keenly in lower-prestige institutions and departments; institutions like these will not only face the pressure to increase admissions rates described here, but will be forced to recruit from a less well-

prepared pool of students to begin with, as higher-prestige institutions dip into their traditional recruiting pool to make up for smaller numbers (Yonezawa & Kim, 2008). These lower-level students will then often find themselves in a setting with relaxed standards for passing and graduation, placing little pressure on them to perform academically. The potential effects of these policies in the classroom are easy to see.

Along with making the university more attractive to potential students, many institutions will try to widen the net, recruiting a wider variety of students. As non-traditional students are still a largely untapped resource in Japanese higher education—less than 3% of students entering Japanese universities in 2015 were over 20 years of age, according to MEXT (2016)—this often means adding and expanding programs and services: adding departments and degree-granting programs, for example. Such a strategy is often difficult in the short term, as newly-added departments will have poor teacher-to-student ratios and thus poor profitability, producing a drain on institutional resources. The other primary avenue for widening recruitment is, again, relaxing entrance standards, which has the added effect of feeding back into recruitment as described above.

As the shrinking population of students leaves fewer potential students waiting in the wings to replace students who leave university early, the other major tactic Japanese universities must employ is working to retain students. Again, there are two primary tracks for this strategy. The first way, easier in the short term, is to relax grading and graduation standards to ensure that fewer students flunk out, a policy made more attractive by the fact that relaxed graduation standards are also an excellent recruitment tool. Many educators at lower-prestige universities in Japan whom I have talked to in the course of my research report are finding themselves under pressure at the administrative level to pass students whenever possible. Such policies are related to these pressures. Another way, more difficult in the short term perhaps, is working harder to ensure that students successfully transition into higher education. New student seminars and learning cohorts are one common strategy here, as is holding individual departments and teachers accountable for low attendance rates and asking instructors to closely follow-up on struggling and at-risk students.

Particularly coupled with the change in general preparedness of incoming students for university-level study described above, this can be a daunting task. Many instructors find themselves ill-equipped and poorly trained for a job that they may not even feel is part of the job of a university-level instructor, having been educated themselves in contexts where it explicitly was not.

To summarize, many Japanese universities are implementing a coupled pair of strategies. On the one hand, universities are relaxing entrance standards, admitting more students with a wider range of academic backgrounds, especially at lower-prestige institutions, more students who are less prepared for university-level study. At the same time, universities are relaxing academic standards for current students, making it easier for students to pass and graduate, and using these entrance and grading standards as recruitment tools. These dual policies can have an enormous impact on the character of university students today: more students are entering university less well-prepared for all aspects of university-level study, without adequate support to integrate into university academically or socially, and without the impetus to learn to be good students on their own.

University Students in a High-Access Context

The pressures on Japanese higher education I have described, and the institution-level policies they tend to lead to, can be expected to have powerful effects on the character of university students in this country. There are two areas that will have a particular impact in the classroom setting: new students' approaches to higher education, and their readiness for university-level study.

In a high-access higher education setting, more and more students will see a university education as something that they need to do; more students will be attending university not necessarily because they want to, but because they feel, or are told, that they must. These students may have fewer concrete goals or expectations as to what they will achieve at university, and fewer concrete plans for how to use their university education in the future. Realistic and appropriate goal-setting has been well-studied as a factor in success (Elliott & Dweck, 1988), and in the same vein many studies have shown that lack of realistic expectations for university-level study can be a predictor of lack of success (Byrne et al., 2012;

Grimes, 1997; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Additionally, more students will see a university education as something that must help them in concrete ways, and will view the student-university relationship as a primarily transactional one. These students will be less patient with courses or content that are not obviously helpful to them or applicable to the "real world". Finally, expectations engendered by policies aimed at raising graduation rates and relaxing educational standards may well lead students to believe that university is something they should expect to succeed at.

Readiness for university-level education can also be expected to see a shift. Lower-prestige universities in particular, often forced to recruit students from a pool of young people who would not have had the chance to attend university in even the quite recent past, will have to recruit students with less-rigorous academic preparation, not only in terms of simple knowledge, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of study skills. Such students will be less prepared for the sort of time management and task prioritization skills that are necessary for success at university (but only very rarely taught directly). At least as importantly, however, students coming from these non-traditional backgrounds will have less social support for success at university; fewer people around them, whether peers or family members, will have the experience of going to university and the ability to give important understanding, advice, and help if the student struggles.

In short, in the current climate of higher education in this country, an expanding higher education system is forced to admit a larger percentage of students who are at the same time less prepared for university-level education, both academically and socially, and who feel that university is something that everyone should be able to succeed at. This creates a generation gap of sorts between students and faculty, exacerbated by the rapid pace of the change here. A typical foreign faculty member here, who attended university outside of Japan 15 or 20 years ago, will not only have gone to university in a much different setting access-wise, but will have had professors (who shaped this hypothetical instructor's view of what a university professor is) who were educated in, and inherited outlooks from, a vastly different context, whether generational,

cultural, or both in the case of older foreign instructors. Add to this that many who enter careers in education, especially at the university level, will have advanced degrees and the approach to education that this requires, and we can see how faculty mindsets might be very different indeed from those of the typical student today.

Implications for Educators in Japanese Institutions of Higher Education

As university educators in Japan, many of us find ourselves under twin pressures. On one hand, our institutions are, out of pure economic necessity, widening the admissions net, changing the face of our student body. Many of our students are and will continue to be less well-prepared for higher education, both academically and socially, than even in the recent past. On the other hand, our institutions are, again out of necessity, asking us to increase our retention and graduation rates.

In some sense, this gives us two choices. One is to dumb it down, throw up our hands, and pass and graduate all our students, regardless of how much or how well they learn. Or we can realize that higher education has changed, fundamentally and irreversibly, and that we need to change our very approach to our jobs, in terms of how we see our struggling students, how we engage with them, and what we must teach them. Rather than dumbing down, university-level educators need to change what we do in order to pull our students up to give them the skills, both hard and soft, that they need to succeed at university.

Concluding Remarks

All too often, I meet university-level educators who bemoan “students these days” and their unwillingness to do even the simplest work to succeed. It is certainly a seductive position to take, to place the burden and blame in the laps of the students, and it is absolutely true that the changes I have outlined in this paper create a sometimes frustrating set of challenges for university faculty here. At the same time, though, whenever I present on this topic I am struck by how little foreign faculty members in Japan are aware of the underlying issues I have described here. Much of this comes down to lack of communication between

Japanese administration and (often part-time or short-contract) English-speaking faculty, and even in some cases between administration and Japanese-speaking faculty. Many foreign faculty members I speak to see policies such as I have described as stupid, short-sighted, ill-informed, and some feel that they wish they could take a hard-line stance and simply flunk out all the students who fail to meet their standards.

But in the end, I think that we need to realize that, whatever we wish our jobs were, and whatever we wish our students were like, the simple reality is that this is the state of higher education in this country today. These are the students we get, and that is simply not going to change. We need to realize that, by admitting these young people to university, we have taken on an ethical responsibility to educate them at the university level, and what that means is very different from what it meant when many of us were undergraduates ourselves. Today, in this country, and especially at lower-prestige institutions, it means that we must teach many of our students how to be successful university students. This may conflict with our ideas about what a university professor does, and we might come from contexts that romanticized a sink or swim approach from professors. But this is the reality in which we find ourselves, and this is what it means to be a university instructor in Japan today.

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