Global Perspectives

Around the World in 45 Minutes—Japan

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Introduction

This panel section provides a brief overview of the current state of distance education (DE) in Japan. It covers three areas of DE: opportunities and learner populations in the country, socio-cultural characteristics of DE that may have influenced the values and perceptions of Japanese people toward DE, and successes and challenges to be considered for further development of DE in Japan.

This paper is best understood when read together with another paper entitled "Obscure Profile of Distance Learning in Japan" (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012), also presented at DTL 2012. These complementary papers both capture the current state of DE in Japan, as seen from different perspectives and approaches. The current paper includes personal views of the presenter and is case-oriented, whereas the "Obscure Profile" paper is largely a fact-based report on DE in Japan.

DE opportunities and enrollments

Japan is a country in which DE is widely practiced. Along with the formal educational system of elementary and secondary schools, various opportunities to use DE for further learning are available to Japanese throughout their lives. Formally, under the Distance Education School Laws promulgated by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (MEXT), DE schools are regulated at the junior high school, high school, and college and university (including undergraduate and graduate programs) levels: these include regulations regarding teaching methods, accreditation, full-time teacher ratio, facilities, and organization.

Table 1 provides an overview of the most recent enrollments in DE (e-Gov, 2012). The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of full-time students when that information is available. The numbers at the bottom represent the total enrollments including both on-campus and DE, although the numbers could differ slightly depending on how the total is defined. In comparison, the population of Japan as of 2011 was 128,057,000 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: Statistics Bureau, 2012), which is approximately 40% of the US population of 313,584,921 (United States Census Bureau, 2012).

Table 1 DE enrollments in formal education compared with traditional schools

		High (3 years)	Colleges (2 years)	Universities (4 years)	Graduates (Masters)	Graduates (Masters)*	Graduates (Doctors)
DE	Male	97,294	5,091 (4,821)	94,062 (75,192)	4,210 (1,817)	486 (363)	96 (96)
	Female	90,957	14,398 (12,842)	123,174 (98,453)	3,327 (1,405)	47 (41)	75 (75)
	Total	188,251	19,489 (17,663)	217,236 (173,645)	7,537 (3,222)	533 (404)	171 (171)
Total		3,349,255	150,007 (145,047)	2,569,349	272,566		

*The master's programs with an asterisk signify newly accredited programs since 2003 focusing on professional development such as law, business, and education.

In addition to DE in formal education, various other opportunities to learn by distance are available to people in Japan. There are three levels of distance education in Japan, each serving a different social function: formal, semi-formal, and informal (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012). Nearly from cradle to grave, DE, along with formal education, fulfills the special learning needs of people at different stages of life. Although the numbers could differ slightly depending on the definition of enrollment, the percentage of DE of total enrollments within the "formal" category is as high as 5.6% for high school, and 13.0% for college [8.5% for undergraduates and 3.0% for graduates] (e-Gov, 2012), for an average of 7.5%. It is not clear whether this number is large or small compared with other countries in other situations; however, this number signifies that of 20 students enrolled in various schools in the "formal education" category, one or two of them are likely to be current DE learners. The population of DE learners in Japan is undoubtedly much larger when including the "semi-formal" and "informal" categories of DE as well as cross-border enrollments by Japanese students in foreign distance education institutions for which precise records are not available. Moreover, this situation is thought to be the similar in other countries as well.

Influential factors and the value of DE

Three determining factors are discussed that influence DE school and course management in Japan: duality, informality, and private funding.

Duality refers to the situation in which the majority of DE schools are run as dual-mode; that is, many of them offer both traditional face-to-face and distance instruction in the same institution. According to the annual School Survey (e-Gov, 2012), only seven of 44 DE universities (approximately 16%) and 89 of 210 DE high schools (approximately 42%) are single-mode or exclusively offering distance programs. Therefore, the majority of DE schools in Japan are said to be dual-mode. With regard to higher education, the predominance of this duality is likely related to the origin of systematic distance education universities in the country; that is, many private universities, seeking to offer flexible alternatives for learners, started as dual-mode institutions (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012).

Informality refers to another duality among the country's socio-cultural factors wherein formal or official aspects are often complemented and supported by informal or unofficial aspects in many parts of life. This dynamic is paramount and is commonly known as a "honne (real) versus tatemae (expected)" distinction (Takeo, 1985), which is apparent in various aspects of social customs in Japan. Attending traditional campus-based schools only during a certain (younger) stage of life is one of these social customs. After this fixed period of study, people are more likely to rely on informal or unofficial methods of learning, and this demand is satisfied by DE opportunities throughout our lives.

Private Funding refers to the fact that the majority of DE schools are run by private institutions. According to the annual School Survey (e-Gov, 2012), all of the 65 institutions in higher education that offer DE programs (including junior colleges, undergraduate and graduate universities) are legally defined as private (100%), and 137 of 210 DE offering high schools (65%) are private. Therefore, the majority of DE institutions are private. This majority should be much more dominant when we take into account DE schools in private sectors within the "informal" education category. Compared with those mega-sized DE universities that are run primarily through national support and/or status (Moore & Kearsley, 2012), the level of private funding in DE schools in Japan is notable. Currently, only a few of the more established and reputable public universities have adopted some DE programs.

All of these factors are interrelated and have greatly affected the valuation of DE learning opportunities in Japan. DE is largely accepted and valued because people rely on DE as a "real" and indispensable part of their learning. It is common for the same person to attend a "formal" traditional public school and an "informal" DE school in the private sector at the same time (TAC, n.d.), thus creating a self-planned dual-mode learning environment.

It is notable that the Japanese government provides support for DE learning, regardless of the level of formality or the institutional format. Under the "Training and Education Benefits System," the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare offers up to 100,000 yen of financial support (approximately $1,000), within certain requirements and criteria, for professional development via traditional, DE, or e-learning courses (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, n.d.). This financial support reflects the nation's view concerning the importance of DE for its role in citizens' further development and continuing education.

DE successes and challenges

The parameters for measuring the success of DE are not easily defined. Nonetheless, two elements, which have been fostered from Japan's long experience of DE practice back to the 1880s, can be noted as contributing to the success of Japan's DE systems: cost-competitiveness and flexibility.

Cost-competitiveness refers to the fact that DE school fees are generally much lower than those at traditional institutions. Table 2 is a simulated school expense comparison between on-campus and DE programs in the same dual-mode university. In this case, the example simulates fees for the first year's enrollment in the study of law at Nihon University (Nihon University Department of Distance Education, 2012; Passnavi, 2012).

Table 2 On-campus versus DE expenses in the same university

On-campus		DE	
Entrance fees	¥260,000	Entrance fees	¥30,000
Course fees	¥650,000	Course fees	¥99,000
Facilities	¥190,000	—	—
Total	¥1,100,000	Total	¥12,900

The total expenses for on-campus and DE programs are approximately $11,000 and $1,290, respectively; in other words, DE expenses are only 12% of those for an on-campus program. In Japan, the annual course fees are likely to be fixed and do not change with the number of courses taken per year; this is the same with on-campus programs. The case of Nihon University is not an exception, as the majority of DE programs in Japan adopt a similar policy. Therefore, from the learner's perspective, Japan's DE schools are highly competitive in terms of cost-efficiency (Association of Private Distance Education Universities, 2012). This cost-efficiency may be because the management of DE schools is primarily supported by the on-campus components if it is a dual-mode institution. This is in marked contrast to policies in some North American schools, where distance education is used to subsidize campus-based learning models (Bates, 2011).

Flexibility refers to the wide selection of learning modes that are offered by DE programs. It is not uncommon for DE programs to offer the same course content in different learning modes, including on-site, traditional DE, and more recently, e-learning in the same institution (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012). This flexibility may be more visible with DE in informal and private sectors. It is reasonable to believe that the flexibility of learning modes offered is realized because of the dual-mode trend, which allows schools to hold different policies for several learning modes. In any respect, learners expect DE programs to take the initiative to plan and design learning so that the goal of each learner can be realized more easily.

Although many challenges or threats to DE exist, two in particular will be noted: depopulation and external pressure.

Depopulation of Japan has been a major socio-economic threat for decades. Figure 1 shows the chronological change in population of Japan and a population estimate for 2050 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: Statistics Bureau, 2012). The number of newborns has been decreasing rapidly, and the

population "pyramid" that existed 60 years ago, in 1950, has rapidly turned upside down. Recent studies have shown that amongst G8 countries, and possibly in the whole world, Japan has the highest percentage of older population above 65, followed by Germany and Italy (De Souza, 2012). In sum, the Japanese society is losing the learner population of younger generations, which necessitates radical change, not only in the education system, both on-campus and DE, but in various aspects of Japan's entire socio-economic structure.

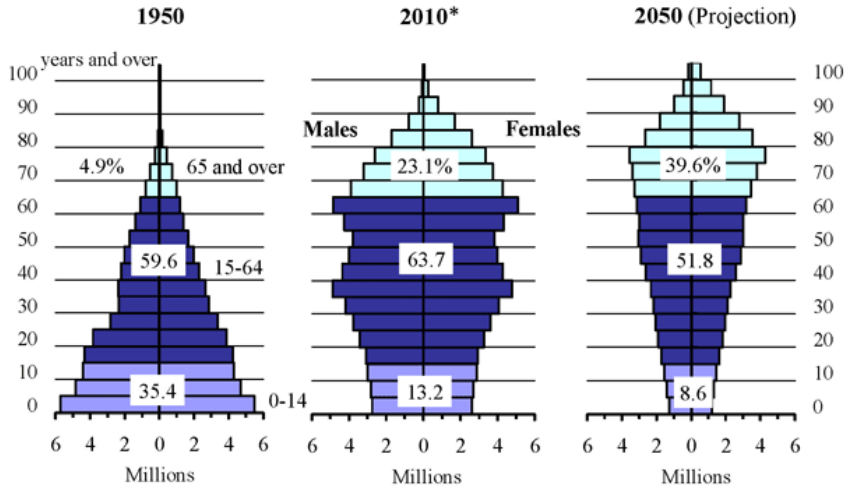

Figure 1. *Changes in the Population Pyramid in Japan*

External Pressure refers to the new learning opportunities brought by the global network and by external foreign educational systems. Japan has been monolingual, and the use of the Japanese language has been a major obstacle in preventing foreign institutions from entering the country and for Japanese students enrolling in courses delivered internationally. However, e-learning has given rise to a rapidly growing global learning environment with new types of learners who are not only digital natives but who are also bilingual in Japanese and another languages like English (or potentially multilingual) (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012). No longer is DE only a way to provide access to learning opportunity for the old image of poor learners surrounded by various limitations. Now, learners can and do take control of their learning, choosing from almost unlimited choices that transcend cultural and economic boundaries. The global DE network is one of those choices.

Conclusion

Although DE has been practiced in Japan for more than a century, Japan's relative lateness and current level of maturation in adapting new technology to DE delivery and management may come from a belief that society knows what fits best in a socio-cultural-economic context. More research is needed, including both formal and informal categories of education, to elucidate the true state of DE in Japan. Japan's openness toward and willingness to participate in DE learning needs to be communicated throughout the world.

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