

Higher Education And the Labor Market

By Mikao Kusuyama

An increasing number of young Japanese continue their education after graduating from senior high school. One out of two of all youths over 18 are still attending school of one sort or another. However, the number of those who go on to a university or junior college, until recently collectively referred to as institutions of higher education, is on the decline. Instead there has been a conspicuous increase in attendance at "special training schools" offering specialized courses. This change in the education career path taken by youths after high school has made for changes in upper secondary school education. This report is an attempt to explain the situation in Japan regarding post-secondary school education and the reform of higher education.

For a start, let us look at the state of admissions to higher institutions in fiscal 1982 as revealed in the Ministry of Education's annual statistics. Fully 94.3% of students graduating from lower secondary school (junior high school), or completing their compulsory education through 15 years of age, went on either to senior high school or to vocational school. This ratio was the same as in the preceding year and the second highest in the world after the United States. It was higher for girls (95.5%) than for boys (93.2%), as it has been since 1969. The ratio of advancement to senior high schools has doubled in the past 30 years, primarily because of the rapid increase in the number of girls seeking higher secondary education.

The ratio of advancement to senior high school reached the 94% level in 1979, which is believed to be about the limit. There is, of course, some regional disparity, but the ratio already exceeds 91% in all of Japan's 47 prefectures. In 19 prefectures, the ratio dropped in 1982 over the preceding year. Overall, however, today all youngsters who wish to go on to upper secondary schools are able to do so, and the real question now is what they elect to do after graduation from senior high school.



A scene of the enrollment ceremony at the University of Tokyo, one of Japan's most prestigious universities

Post-high school education

In March 1982, 1,450,000 students graduated from Japan's high schools. Of these, 448,000 entered universities and junior colleges, a ratio of 30.9%, further broken down into 28.9% for boys and 32.8% for girls. This was the first time since 1975 that a higher percentage of girls entered institutions of higher education than boys.

In 1975, the ratio for both girls and boys peaked at 34.2%, and has been gradually falling since (this figure is for students entering university or junior college straight from high school, and does not include those who stayed out of school one or more years before gaining admission).

It would be amiss to conclude that young people are "drawing away" from

universities solely on the basis of the ratio of those going to university or junior college straight from senior high school. Many students succeed in passing the entrance examinations to university or junior college one or two years after they finish high school. However, it is also true that the number of students signifying a desire to enter a university at the time of their graduation from senior high school has also been decreasing. This ratio was 44.4% in 1982, compared to 47.7% in the 1976 peak year.

On the other hand, government statistics indicate an increase in the number of senior high school graduates enrolling in "special training schools which offer specialized courses," "miscellaneous schools," and government-operated vocational training institutes. In 1982, 319,000 persons, or 22% of those graduating from

Photo: Asahi Shimbun

senior high school, elected to attend such schools. Of these, 139,000, or 9.6% of all graduating seniors, enrolled in "special training schools" for specialized courses, suggesting the growing importance of these schools in post-secondary education.

The special training schools system was established in 1976. Schools which met certain criteria were selected out from the "miscellaneous schools" category and given new status as "special training schools" under the School Education Law. "Miscellaneous schools" have a long history of teaching various technical skills, but have always been considered outside the regular school system. Under the new system, those among them which offer courses of not less than a year's duration, provide more than 800 hours of instruction and have an enrollment of more than 40, fall under the new category. These "special training schools" are further subdivided into general course schools which set no special qualifications for admission, higher secondary training schools for junior high school graduates, and specialized schools for senior high school graduates. The government gives subsidies for specialized school facilities, and students are eligible for scholarship assistance provided by the Japan Education Council.

In addition to students who gain admission to university or junior college immediately upon graduation from senior high school, there are some who fail their first entrance examination but gain admission a year or two later after studying at the university entrance cram schools which fall under the "miscellaneous schools" category. The majority of these students are male. The advancement ratio for the senior high school class of three years ago—those who entered universities directly from high school, plus those who succeeded on their second or third attempt attending four-year courses at technical colleges—comes to 36.9%. In this case, the ratio of male students, being 40.8%, is higher than that of female students, at 32.7%. However, even the advancement ratio calculated on this basis has dropped from a 1976 peak of 39.2%.

The picture changes with the addition of "special training school" enrollment of 9.6%. The resultant overall ratio becomes 48.8%, indicating that virtually one out of every two senior high school graduates goes on to some form of higher education. In contrast, the number of students getting a job upon graduation from senior high school is 602,000, or 42.9%, broken down into 40.1% for boys and 45.6% for girls.

The trend away from universities started in 1975-76, and is conceivably at least in part the result of government policy measures. The year 1976 was the time when the government launched its program for improving higher education.

Program to improve higher education

In the quarter of a century following the establishment of the present university system in 1950, the number of universities trebled and student enrollment increased ninefold. At the same time, national government subsidies to private universities for operating expenses became institutionalized. Around 1976, it became necessary to determine the future direction of higher education. The aim was to shift from quantitative to qualitative improvement, and a program was worked out accordingly based on projected demographic shifts in the population of 18-year-olds.

The program was divided into two stages, the first covering 1976-1980 and the second 1981-1986. The population of 18-year-olds during the first period was expected to remain in the 1,500,000 range, while in the second period it was expected to start at about 1,600,000 and rise to 1,860,000. Universities were concentrated in certain areas, resulting in serious disparities in regional capability to accommodate students. Taking all these factors into consideration, the program aimed at fine-tuning the establishment of new state universities and the expansion of existing ones, and restraining the further establishment and expansion of big city private universities.

The watchword of the program was to make the structure of higher education more flexible. Thus the framework was expanded to include special training schools. At the same time, great hopes were placed on the potential contributions of university correspondence courses and

the University of the Air, now in the preparatory stage.

University of the Air

The University of the Air, the first of its kind in Japan, is scheduled to open in April 1985, and preparations are now underway to begin soliciting students in the fall of 1984. The school will be established as a special corporation and funded by the national treasury. It will have its own broadcasting station and will offer a curriculum consisting mainly of lectures broadcast over radio and television. The university will also provide guidance through correspondence and direct interviews as a "Learning Center." Students enrolled for four or more years will be able to obtain a BA degree.

Initially, the University of the Air will serve only the Tokyo Metropolitan area, which can be adequately covered by UHF broadcasts. In future, plans call for the service area to be expanded nationwide using a direct broadcast satellite (DBS). To gain maximum benefit from the University of the Air, students will ideally have a scholastic background equivalent to that of a senior high school graduate. However, there will be no rigid qualifications, and no entrance examinations. It is planned to first enroll 10,000 students, of whom 7,000 will take a full course load as regular students. The remainder will take only specific subjects or subject groups. The university is expected to eventually have a steady enrollment of 30,000.

The University of the Air will by nature be an extremely open and free institution,



Tsuda School of Business in Tokyo that puts stress on secretarial training programs

as anyone can tune in to its lectures. The non-restrictive admission standards compared with conventional universities also means that the door has been opened wide to the public to receive higher education. The "classroom" medium—direct radio and TV broadcasts—automatically overcomes the traditional criticism of the exclusivity of Japanese universities, and is an excellent example of greater flexibility in higher education.

The efforts to bring greater flexibility to higher education do not stop with the University of the Air and special training schools. It is significant that although Japan has more students attending university than most other advanced countries, a much smaller percentage are enrolled in graduate schools. Compared to 20% in Britain and 10% in the U.S., only 3% of Japanese students are in graduate programs. In order to rectify this situation, new types of graduate schools are being set up, including research institutes independent of university affiliations, three-year doctorate courses, and masters courses for training high-level specialists. Universities, meanwhile, have agreed to enroll junior college and technical college graduates in their third year programs, and make it more convenient for students to attend classes by offering evening lectures. They are also taking a more positive attitude toward adult education.

The government has also sought to promote larger faculties and the active interchange of personnel between universities in order to break down the wall of exclusivity around these institutions. The appointment of foreign educators as regular instructors in national universities has also been permitted. This is a major step toward achieving the long-sought internationalization of Japan's universities.

The opening of lectures and recognition of credits not only between universities in Japan but between Japanese and foreign universities should also be encouraged. It is further hoped that universities will hold joint seminars or summer sessions on a regional basis or on the basis of specialized disciplines and open their lectures to each other's students.

Behind the trend away from universities and the growing interest in special training schools are the serious doubts many young people harbor about the relevance of a university education to their life after graduation. Many are beginning to feel they would be better off with a specialized skill instead of a general university education. This would suggest a need for the universities to reflect on their role as educational institutions.

Another reason for the defection from universities is the desire to sidestep the intensive preparations required to gain admission to a university. This accounts for the popularity of the special training schools, which are easier to enter. But it also means these schools will have to work hard not to betray the expectations of their students.

Only when each of these highly diversified institutions of higher education has acquired its own unique character will they be able to provide truly effective education. All schools must have their own identities. At the same time, students aspiring to enroll in these institutions must have a clearly articulated desire to enter a specific school as well as the ability to chart their own educational careers. If senior high school graduates are simply selecting special training schools over universities out of peer pressure or the desire to conform, they cannot be said to be making wise choices for their future.

Senior high school graduates must act on their own initiative to make their post-secondary school education fruitful and rewarding.

Posing a serious threat to higher education ideals is the current university entrance examination system, which has been called the cancer of Japanese education. Various attempts have been made to improve this system, but the reforms have only given rise to as many evils as they have remedied. The universal preliminary examination system which all state and public universities adopted in 1979, under which an identical test is administered to all students aspiring to enter a state or public university, is already under pressure for re-examination. What is needed is not a reform of the entrance examination system, but an overall reform of the quality and substance of universities and other institutions of higher learning. Nor can the problem be divorced from the reception society gives graduates of higher educational institutions.

Another important topic that cannot be ignored in any discussion of post-secondary school education is the concept of "life-long education." It has been predicted that the education one receives following graduation from senior high school will gradually come to have less influence in determining one's career path for the rest of one's life. It will be necessary in the future to constantly up-date and up-grade the skills learned. At the same time, as the greying of Japanese society proceeds, the number of people actively seeking opportunities to study and learn will increase. The idea of "a learning society" where anyone can study anytime and anywhere will gradually become universal. It will become necessary, and soon, to consider post-secondary school education in the broader context of a learning society.

The number of Japanese higher educational institutions and their respective enrollments as of May 1982 were as follows:

	No. of schools	No. of students
Universities	455	1,818,000
Graduate schools	265	59,000
Junior colleges	526	374,000
Technical colleges (4-5 year system)	62	17,000



Nippon Electronics Engineering College, a vocational training school for those students looking for engineering careers

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