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Institutions in Transition: Japan's "Community Colleges" — An Update

Joyce S. Tsunoda and Keiichi Yoshimoto

Moving History: Building Japan's "Community Colleges"

In the 2008 edition the chapter on Japan described the post-1947 reorganizational history of the national education system as a 6-3-3-4 structure in which the "higher education" category consisting primarily of the "universities", followed by the establishment of "junior colleges" in the 1950's, and then the inclusion of the "colleges of technology" and the "professional/specialized training colleges" in the 1960's. The chapter then presented as case-studies, snapshots of three specific institutions and their respective status as of 2005. The sociological profile which emerged then was that of a highly centralized educational system centered around the standards and practices of the universities with the three "non-university" sector institutions left each on its own to determine its respective mission and role, to seek academic "legitimacy" and social recognition, and even the raison d'etre for existence as higher educational institution. Therefore, the chapter was titled "Institutions in Transition", but to what destination(s)?

Among the three "non-university" sectors, the junior colleges appeared to be most vulnerable. As shown in the Appendix at the end of this text, as of 2005 there were 488 junior colleges among the 4,250 higher educational institutions in Japan, with enrollment of 7.3% of the national total. Nearly all of these junior colleges are privately owned and exist as sub-group of a university system leaving only a handful as free-standing institutions. Therefore, the questions that remained unanswered in the 2008 edition were the following:

"Is there a long-term vision, let alone need for junior colleges in the 21st century Japan?"

"Is there any sense of collective identity and common educational mission among the currently remaining junior colleges, or are they all waiting to 'grow-up' into a university?"

"Does anyone in Japan care if junior colleges continue to exist or not?"

After six years of working within the tradition-bound setting of higher education in Japan, I detect some movements, both at the central governmental as well as at the grassroots levels, to re-examine and clarify the roles and functions of the "non-university sector institutions. Questions are being raised on issues such as:

Vocational relevance in higher education.

Public accountability in the age of "universal higher education".

The significance of learning outcomes.

Appropriate professional qualification of faculty and staff for the "non-university" sectors.

Need for networking and meaningful connections locally as well as globally.

These key issues are been framed into social and educational policy agenda, seemingly more at grassroots levels rather by central bureaucracy. Among such grassroots leaders is a dispassionate scholar of social policy and higher education, Professor Keiichi Yoshimoto of Kyushu University Graduate School of Human-Environmental Studies whom I invited to co-author this revised chapter and to share his experiences and views on his research and field work, particularly with the Japanese junior colleges. I am more confident now than in 2005 that the Japanese junior colleges, while remaining few in number, will redefine and claim its place under the sun within Japanese education.

Moving Toward Community Centered Education: Continuing Challenges for the Non-University Sectors of Japanese Tertiary Education

Scope and Classification of "Higher Education" System in Japan

The Japanese higher education system can be viewed from both international and domestic classification standards. According to the International Standard of Classification of Education (ISCED), (1) universities; (2) junior colleges; (3) professional training colleges; and (4) colleges of technology are classified as Tertiary Education ISCED5, which are "linked to a degree", as contrasted to ISCED4 Post-Secondary Education, which is not linked to a degree. The ISCED5 category is further sub-classified as ISCED5A, "those programs that are theoretically based or research preparatory" or "programs which give access to professions with high skill requirements", and ISCED 5B which are "practical, technical, and/or occupationally specific.". Only bachelor or master programs of universities fall into the ISCED5A category, and the junior colleges, professional training colleges and colleges of technology are ISCED5B institutions.

However, the national degree standards stipulate that degrees conferred by the universities and junior colleges are "academic degrees" and are accepted as such socially. This leaves unsettled as of now the nature and social status of the degrees conferred by the other two Tertiary ISCED5B institutions, in particular those of the professional training colleges.

Emerging Need to Focus on Career Education/Vocational Education

As Japan ushered in the Heisei Era (Era of the Hesei Emperor) in 1989, the country came face to face with the issues of economic downturn, ever decreasing population and the "universalization" of higher education. Now, there are enough colleges and universities within Japan to accommodat all college age population. Yet, the dream destinations of most high school graduates and of the parents, continue to be the "elite four year universities". This social attitude unnecessarily forces countless youngsters onto the narrow pathway of the one-track "escalator" seeking entry into "prestigious universities", regardless of the individual abilities and inclinations.

According to the 2010 national statistics on destinations of Japanese, Compared with number of 3rd year student cohort of middle school in 2006, high school graduates correspond 88% of them. Then after, high school graduates go on to 47.8% entered universities (778 institutions); 6% went to junior colleges (395 institutions); 15.9% to professional training colleges (2904 institutions); and

15.8% entered employment. In term of gross enrollment ratio, adding "ronin" (those who made one year or more of preparation for admission examination) and mature students compared with age cohort, it is 50.9% into university, 22% professional training college, 5.9% junior college and 0.9% colleges of technology (58 institutions). In short, about one fourth of the high school graduate went to non-university sectors of higher education in spite of the fact that there are about five times more of these non-university type institutions than there are universities.

However, cracks in this rigid social-educational environment may be surfacing as economic and social realities make "vocationalization" of higher education an increasingly important aspect of social as well as educational policies. Concerned educators and other stakeholders[1] are beginning to take actions to review and redefine the respective roles and functions of each sector of higher education, particularly with respect to vocational education. In January 2009, a special committee on career and vocational education was formed by the Central Education Council (Chuou Kyouiku Shingikai) to review ways and means to implement career and vocational education in order to educate and develop individuals as full-fledged citizens and self-sufficient wage earners building his/her career independently and contributing members of the society. This special committee focused on the changing employment market in which "employability" no longer means graduating with academic degrees and being ready for on-the-job-training by employers with assurance of life-time employment. Instead, the new and emerging employment market gives priority to graduates with specific skills, knowledge, and readiness to compete for specialized jobs.

In its report issued in July 2009, the special committee argued for a change in the current unitary track education structure that places expectation on universities to provide various functions, including comprehensive vocational education. The committee report recommended setting clear standards for programmatic contents, the composition and qualifications of faculty, and other quality framework issues which would denote special priority to vocational education as "school education" (The Special Committee for Career and Vocational Education 2009). It is an irony, however, that in the prevailing legally-based lexicon of Japanese higher education, the terminology "school education" remain not applicable to the professional training colleges. This leaves the issue of credentialing of vocational education in higher education sectors still unresolved and opened for continuing debates. Nevertheless, it can be said that the Japanese society has started to pay attention to the young people's needs and attitudes toward vocations and work as the number of job-hoppers, or NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) increased since the 1990's, and the business world began diversifying employment strategies after the collapse of the bubble economy.

Colleges of Technology and Professional Training Colleges

Any discussion on higher education in Japan would not be complete without mentioning the current and possible future statuses of the colleges of technology and the professional training colleges.

The colleges of technology (koutou senmonn gakkou) is designated in Section 115 of the

[1] Stakeholders: this term has gained popular usage in the Japanese higher education to describe people with an interest in, or are connected with, higher education such as students, parents, applicants, employers and other community members.

Japanese Education Law as an institution which offers a unified five-year education (five years six months for mercantile marines studies) aimed at nurturing technical experts. It requires graduation from middle schools or equivalent academic ability for admission. The graduates are awarded the certificate as "Associate Diploma"(Jun gakushi). Recent OECD review (OECD2006) has given high marks for the effectiveness of this five-year alternative to the traditional senior high school programs and two years' higher education programs. The success of these colleges of technology may be attributed to its limited number, almost one per prefecture, and due to the significantly high level of support by national government funding. It is highly unlikely that this working model will be expanded much further toward becoming a substantial part of the universal higher education system.

As mentioned in the preceding section, professional training colleges (senmon gakkou) are one of the three non-university sectors of Japanese higher education. Admission to professional training colleges requires graduation from high schools or equivalent academic ability. There are over 3000 such specialized training colleges enrolling close to 15% of the total higher education students. Most of these colleges are privately owned and are very enterprising. In the 2008 edition, the extensive scope of the Jikei Group was featured as a thriving example of the higher educational sector that comes close to being the community college of Japan. In 1994 the professional training colleges were authorized to grant "qualification" labeled as "specialist diploma"(senmonshi) for completion of two or three years program, and "advanced specialist diploma"(koudo senmonshi) for completion of four year programs. However, the existing legal definition of "academic degree" recognizes only those credentials granted by the universities and junior colleges. (The Junior Colleges were authorized to offer Associate Degree since 2005.) This leaves open for debate the issue of the "academic legitimacy" of the credentials of professional training colleges. It can be argued that if "skilled-centered training, education and research" is the legal basis of university education, then the professional training colleges can be said to be part of that multi-polar, wide spectrum of the educational-training function of higher education. The recent entry of traditional universities into the realm of vocational-technical training adds further fuel to the debates. While "vocationalization of higher education" may be a global issue, in an tradition-bound and credential conscious society (Gakureki-shakai) like Japan, the currently waging debates are likely to continue for an indefinite period.

Renewal of Junior College Education: Toward "Colleges of the New Era"

Today, it can be said that while remaining relatively small in terms of number of institutions and total enrollment shared within Japanese higher education, the junior colleges of Japan are not about to fade into oblivion. Instead, collectively at the national level and even more so at the local and regional levels, junior college educators have been steadfastly working to rebuild the educational foundation and organizational identity of junior colleges, and are pushing themselves to claim a prominent position within higher education as "Japan's community colleges". Association of Private Junior Colleges of Japan, known as "Nittankyou" continues to serve as the voice of junior colleges nationally and internationally. As mentioned, Nittankyou, working with the U.S. accrediting associations, established a self-governing Accrediting

Commission which then assumed the leadership in formulating and implementing the nation's first comprehensive institutional accreditation system with regular cycles of institutional self-studies and third party visitations. This comprehensive accreditation system has been well-accepted by the membership and celebrated its 7th successful year in 2011.

Turning its attention then to the current situation and toward the future, Nittankyou, established a special committee and charged it to formulate a "grand plan" for the restructuring and renewal of junior college education in Japan. The special committee report, issued in January 2009, contained goals and strategies for a "New Era of Junior Colleges and Our Roles and Functions". This report included accounts of fact-finding visits to the non-university higher education sectors of U.S. and Europe, as well as self-identification of the current problems facing Japanese junior colleges, and, most significantly, specified plans and action targets for programmatic and operational reforms .

The Nittankyou report titled *The Twenty-First Century is a World of Knowledge-Based* Society maps out roles (yakuwari) and functions (kinou) of junior college education in Japan and details out specific action agenda for changes in curricula, teaching and guidance approaches and methodologies, and specifies faculty/staff qualifications necessary for effective junior college teaching and organizational management. Reforms necessary for total institutional transformation as "Junior Colleges for the New Era" poised to assume responsibilities as providers of access to higher education, aptly referring to themselves as the "first stage institutions" of higher education. The Plan also makes junior colleges as purveyors of well-balanced general and vocational educational programs for human resource development; as attentive listeners to the needs of students and others seeking educational services; and as active partners with various stakeholders in the communities, locally and globally.

If nothing else, this "Grand Plan for the New Era Junior Colleges", has given an "outward and forward" direction to the junior colleges and challenged the institutions to build on their collective 60 year history as part of Japanese higher education. Its tacit message to the member junior colleges seems to be, "Now is NOT the time to wait to grow-up into universities, now is the time for us to seize the opportunity to define what we as junior colleges can do best, and to be an equal partner with four-year institutions to make higher education in Japan the key means to the country's future."

The "Grand Plan or Junior Colleges": Reactions and Actions

In a rather typical Japanese style, there seems to have been no big fanfare in rolling out the "Grand Plan", nor any signs of resounding reactions for or against the "Grand Plan." However, there were detectable signs of efforts to implement some concepts extolled by the Grand Plan. The concepts of redirecting attention to "communities" and listening to the voices of various "stakeholders" seem to be particularly important issues of focus for the member colleges.

Such a trial implementation effort has been the formulation and implementation of the Chiiki Sougou Kagakka, loosely translated as "Comprehensive Community-based Career Exploratory Curriculum" (Tachi ed. 2002). The Otemae Junior College in Ashiya City in the Kansai region, for example, started the "Life Design Department" which features a creative career exploratory program allowing students to build her own career studies curriculum based on selection of curricular "units" from various related specialized vocations and careers such as Fashion Business,

Fashion Creation, Make-Up, Interior Design, Art and Design, Information and Network Technologies, Communication, Business Administration and Management to create her own major field of study and training. There are required units of common core in general education including languages, and Japanese language and culture. According to President Yu Fukui of Otemae Junior College, the fundamental goal of this Life Design Education is to give students the chance to "put the building of her own career in her own hands", under the guidance of institutionally-based and thoughtfully designed orientation, guidance and follow-up system which includes employment search, and in some cases, internship opportunities in the community. This type of flexible, "create-your-own" curriculum is unique in Japan, and requires changes in the attitudes and approaches of the faculty and staff as well as close relationships with the community's businesses and industries. Along with Otemae, such Career Exploratory Curricula are being implemented at Koran Junior College in Fukuoka in southern Japan, and several other junior colleges.

One of the desired follow-up outcomes of this career exploratory curricular approach is to enhance transfer opportunities from junior college to universities. Currently, such higher education transfer options and opportunities are very few and limited. However, as part of its role as the "first stage institution", the junior colleges hope to parley this type of career exploration curricular as means to facilitate two-year to four-year transfer. This is one of the "take-home" ideas that the Nittankyou visit teams brought from their visits to the U.S.

Another "outward and forward" reform effort of the junior colleges has been the formation of regional inter-collegiate consortia of junior colleges. The most prominent and long-lasting regional consortium has that of the Junior College Consortium of Kyushu.[2] This Kyushu consortium is made up of nine junior colleges of the Kyushu Region and was started in 2002 with the encouragement of the Junior Colleges Accreditation Commission. The idea of this Kyushu consortium began with informal discussions among the nine junior colleges regarding their desire and need to develop closer working relationships with its regional communities in the geographically extensive Kyushu island. The consortium colleges wanted to become the "Colleges for and of the Kyushu Communities" and that the communities become extension of the respective college's operating environment. The consortia members agreed that when issues such as educational goals, objectives, content and approaches are being considered these discussions should not be limited just to the institutional constituencies but also include stakeholders and other interested members of the " communities. Accordingly, the Kyushu Consortium initiated an inter-collegiate joint project called "Research on the Future of Junior Colleges" and through this project conducted needs assessments, surveys and interviews within the communities, including Annual Graduate Surveys initiated as early as 2003. Based on the results of these annual graduate surveys, the Kyushu Consortium members obtained information useful for individual colleges as well as for the consortium. The most recent efforts of the Kyushu Consortium have been the collective effort to identify and establish learning outcomes as part of educational program development and assessment (Yoshimoto, 2011).

[2] See http://www.kyushu-ccc.jp/

Non-University Higher Education and Qualification Framework

In tandem with the Nittankyou and the Kyushu Consortium, a group of educators under the leadership of Professor Keiichi Yoshimoto of Kyushu University has been conducting operational research, both at regional level and in partnership with selected international educators, to define the appropriate role and function of the non-university education in higher education, with special focus on vocational education. This working group held an international workshop in March 19-20, 2009, at Kyushu University on the theme of "Non-University Higher Education and Qualifications Framework" (Yoshimoto 2010). This was the first of four workshops funded by the Japanese governmental Grants in Aid for Scientific Research, and discussions revolved around questions such as:

- Compared to university education whose function is expanding as access becomes universal, what is the appropriate function of non-university education currently, and what should it be in the future?
- What are the component functions of higher education and which of those functions are best provided by the non-university sectors?
- What are the university and non-university sectors doing about educational objectives, methods and controls of vocational education? Which sector will be best able to provide vocational education properly?
- Is it possible for the non-university sector guarantee quality of vocational education given its current characteristics, and utilizing the same frameworks of terms, methods, and orientation of the university sector?
- Is a new framework for quality control of vocational education needed?

The workshop participants produced an ambitious set of reform goals focused on the importance of "Quality Assurance in Vocational Education". The recommendations included:

- Defining various career pathways and developing associated educational training needed for employability and continued career growth;
- Identification of learning outcomes that are linked to knowledge, skills and competencies to be gain;
- Recognition of value systems and orientations associated with labor and occupational fields;
- Projecting various areas of occupations with future potentials and the experiences associated with them.

The conference report emphasized that goals and objectives are not enough, and challenged junior colleges themselves to assume responsibilities for taking steps to initiate specific changes in current organizational structure and practices especially in educational outcomes assessment in order to realize the goals that have been articulated. The workshop report repeatedly reiterated that piece-

meal implementation will not work, and urged the colleges to proceed based on carefully considered intentions, well-designed plans, and institutional-wide approach. The report emphasized the issue of quality assurance for vocational education as the means to achieve overall educational reform among the Japanese junior colleges. It also underscored the need for cooperation between universities and junior colleges based on level field of mutual respect and understanding of each other's roles and functions. However, there was a caveat that doing so will not be an easy task.

Conclusion

In the 2008 Chapter, the "community colleges" of Japan were identified as the junior colleges, the professional training colleges and the colleges of technology, and that these three non-university sectors of higher education will exist in the shadows of the universities, and that each "will most likely live or die as separate entities" thus depriving the people of Japan of the benefits of educational collaboration. It was also predicted that the junior colleges were vulnerable to losing their collective identity, role and function.

While the mountain has not moved, and universities still dominate the higher education scene, the remaining sectors will not remain complacent. There will be changes. Slowly but surely the people of Japan may be able to experience the benefits that could be derived from a more collaborative, outwardly oriented and forward looking institutions of higher education. The professional training colleges will eventually gain its goal of credentialing equity, and the junior colleges will enter as "community-favored colleges" in philosophy and actions. "Focus on Quality" and "Building Communities" are the key to transforming Japanese higher education.

Anyone familiar with the history of 19th and early 20th century Japan, should not overlook that fact that the Meiji Revolution that overthrew three centuries of central government control from Edo (current Tokyo) began with actions, and not just words, of determined stakeholders from the Kyushu and the southwestern Kansai regions of Japan. What does this say for the current activities of the Kyushu consortium as well as the curricular reforms taken by Otemae Junior College (Kansai Region) and Koran Junior College (Kyushu Region)? It is said that those who do not learn from history will suffer the same consequences.

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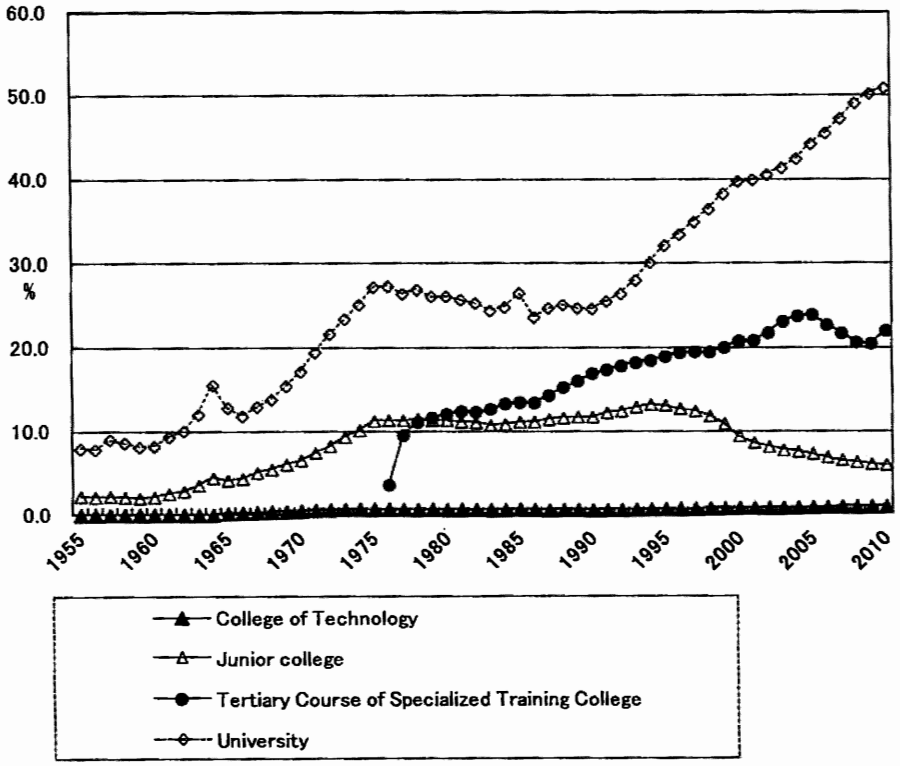
APPENDIX: Tables of Selected Statistics of Japanese Higher Education (2008)

Figure1 Enrollment and Advancement Rate



Note: the rate is new enrolled students per 18 years old cohort
and 4th year grade students in case of college of technology
source: Ministry of Education, School Basic Survey, each year

Table1 Numbers of Higher Education Institutions, Students and Teaching Staffs

	Academic Year 2005	Academic Year 2010		
	institutions	institutions	students in ISCED5	teaching staffs (full
University	726	778	2,559,191	17,4403[2)]
Junior College	488	395	153,171	9,657
Tertiary Course of Specialized Training College	2,973	2,904	564,640	36,257
College of Technology	63	58	23,161	4,373[2)]
Total	4,250	4,135	3,300,163	224,690

Note 1) undergraduate, as of academic year 2010, by School Basic Survey, MEXT
2) including those not in charge of ISCED5 education

Table2 Destinations of Higher Education Graduates (academic year 2009)

Junior College

New graduates		Advancing to higher-level courses	Entering employment	Continuing to study at specialized training colleges,etc	Entering provisional employment	Others	Deceased & unknown
100.0%	(71,394)	11.7%	65.4%	2.4%	5.4%	14.0%	1.0%

Tertiary Course of Specialized Training College

New graduates			Entering employment				unknown
100.0%	(222,968)		74.7%				25.3%

College of Technology

New graduates		Advancing to higher-level courses	Entering employment	Continuing to study at specialized training colleges,etc	Entering provisional employment	Others	Deceased & unknown
100.0%	(10,474)	43.0%	53.6%	1.5%	0.1%	1.9%	0.0%

University

New graduates		Advancing to higher-level courses	Entering employment	Clinical training and candidates	Continuing to study at specialized training colleges,etc	Entering provisional employment	Others	Deceased & unknown
100.0%	(541,728)	13.4%	60.8%	1.7%	2.5%	3.6%	16.1%	2.0%

source: MEXT, School Basic Survey, 2010

note 1) Including those advancing to graduate school, university and junior college, etc.
2) Including those continuing to study at specialized training college,miscellaneous school and any type of school, other than the column of "Advancing to higher level courses", staying as special non-degree student and studying abroad.
3) Including those involved in household work, etc.