



21st Century Language Teaching Conference 2024

Post Conference Proceedings

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From Admission to Integration: Helping Students Thrive in Japanese Higher Education

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Abstract

The Japanese higher education system is under immense pressure from the country's falling population, leading to a need for individual universities to keep student retention as high as possible. At the same time, widening entrance standards caused by increased competition for the shrinking student pool mean that students are increasingly being accepted to university from non-traditional populations, including first-generation students and students from secondary education institutions without a long history of university admissions. Both groups are less prepared for the transition to university life than many students even a single generation ago, leaving them to struggle with the first months of university study, proven critical to success and retention.

Introduction

That Japan is an aging society is a well-known fact; it is expected that by 2025 more than one-third of the total population in this country will be aged 60 or older (Kalache, Barreto, & Keller, 2005). The effects that this change is expected to have on the country as a whole are certainly great, and the ramifications for the Japanese higher education system are no less weighty. The Japanese higher education system faces twin pressures of a pool of potential students that has shrunk precipitously over the past 20 to 25 years, and a higher education system that has continued to grow following policies of expansion initiated in the 20 previous years (Amano, 2010).

Chubu University, like all universities in Japan, has felt these pressures, and much university policy is aimed at keeping the university healthy and viable in what Trow (2010) and others would describe as a universal-access context. To maintain enrollment numbers in this environment, the Department of English Language and Culture has found itself relaxing entrance standards, bringing in students from backgrounds who until quite recently would not have been afforded the opportunity to attend university, and are not as well equipped for university life as their peers 20 or 25 years ago.

The faculty of the Department of English Language and Culture believes that we are preparing incoming students for this transition to university life well, and are creating a supportive and positive environment to foster student success. However, there has been little opportunity to verify these impressions, especially with the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 epidemic beginning in 2020. This is the foundation of this research: a desire to learn more about the students coming in to the English Department, and how well they are being served with assistance in the transition into university life.

Literature Review

Higher Education in a Universal-Access System

The number of young people in this country continues to drop as the population ages, while higher education continues to grow. Coupled with reliance on fresh high school graduates to fill the rolls of first-year students and a strong resistance to opening up admissions to non-traditional students in any meaningful way, the system of higher education finds itself facing a situation in which roughly 60% of 18-year-olds in the country continue on to higher education.

Martin Trow (2010) wrote extensively about the effects that increasing access to higher education can be expected to have on a system of higher education, the institutions within it, and the broader society in which it is situated. Central to Trow's thinking about higher education is a move from a "mass" system of higher education to a "universal" one as total enrollment of the relevant age group passes roughly the 50 percent mark. Most relevant to the issues this study seeks to examine are changes in society's ideas about access to higher education, the functions of higher education, the student career, academic standards, and questions of access and selection (Trow, 2010). In a universal access setting, there is essentially a seat in the higher education system for any person in the society who wants one, providing they meet minimal educational qualifications. This means that the question for most students is not necessarily whether they will attend university, but rather which university a student wishes to attend.

As access continues to increase, more and more students will continue on from secondary school to university not because they necessarily want to, but because they feel they must—this has carry-on effects on their choice of field of study (and how they approach that choice), and their motivation once their studies begin. As more students come from backgrounds not traditionally oriented towards university, fewer will have the support structures, or the academic and social backgrounds, that facilitate the transition to university.

Additionally, with the expansion of admissions to include students from non-traditional backgrounds, a greater proportion of first-generation students can be expected to enroll. The question of first-generation students at university has been studied extensively (see for example Tym et. al., 2004), with the general expectation that first-generation students will be less-prepared for university academically, have less knowledge of systems and institutions, and have more difficulty acclimating themselves to university life after enrolment.

The Transition to Higher Education and Student Retention

The issue of new-student success at Chubu University is often framed and approached in terms of retention. Particular attention is paid here to students in their first semester of study, and a number of policies are in place to help ease their transition into the university community and ensure that faculty are mindful of metrics such as attendance and rates of absence-taking and dropout. The goals of these policies are on one hand to help the students themselves, and on the other to help faculty be aware of students who might be in danger of leaving, allowing them to work proactively to keep these at-risk students in the system.

Tinto (1988) wrote extensively these issues and how they are related to success (in the sense of not departing university prematurely), and in particular how the successful transition from secondary school to university, not only in terms of academics but also in terms of social standing and self-image, is not only critical to success at university, but operates within a rather small window, the passing of which may leave students unable to successfully integrate into the university setting, and more likely to fail to complete their studies.

Students in the Japanese “Universal Access” Setting

To summarize, Trow and Tinto's theories as applied to the Japanese context suggest that we can expect that, especially in the private sector, and especially at lower-prestige institutions, an increasing number of students will be coming to university who come from educational and socioeconomic settings which are not traditionally university-track, are not as well-prepared academically as students from previous generations, and are not as well-prepared socially as students from previous generations, with less-robust family and social support or information networks. It is the goal of this study to examine the experiences of first-year students in the Department of English Language and Culture through this lens.

Description of the Study

This paper describes the first stage of a planned longitudinal study to track students' academic and social experiences in the first few months of university life and beyond. The goal is to create a picture we can use to accurately assess departmental and university efforts to help incoming students with the transition from secondary schools to higher education, paying particular attention to students from backgrounds which the literature suggests would leave them less well-prepared for this transition, and therefore more likely to struggle in their critical first few months at university.

The study began with a survey of all 33 first-year students in the Department of English Language and Culture beginning in Spring semester 2024. This initial survey was given at the end of their first semester of study, and included questions about:

- Self-image as a student and educational background of parents and peers
- How students approached the decision to attend university, the decision to study English, and the decision to attend Chubu University's Department of English Language and Culture
- Academic experiences in the first semester
- Social experiences in the first semester

Initial Findings

Educational Background

8 students (24%) were “verifiably” first-generation students, meaning that they were certain neither of their parents had attended university of any kind. An additional 6 students (for 42% total) answered that they “did not know” if one or more of their parents had attended university, which we believe means that they could reasonably be included in this group of students. Additionally, 14 students (42%) indicated that half or less of their high school peers went on to university, suggesting that they were coming from secondary schools with a less-strong tradition of tracking students into university study, or at least were involved in peer groups that did not generally take advantage of this track. These two groups of students (which do, naturally, have a degree of overlap) might be classed as our most “at-risk” students, coming from family and educational backgrounds which have prepared them less well for university study than other students.

Social Integration with the Department

When asked about their social integration with other first-year students, subjects generally answered positively: 18 students (55%) reported that half or more of their friends were Chubu University students (although a worrying 5 students, for 15%, reported that “none” of their friends were Chubu students), and 23 students (70%) reported that they had positive or mostly positive relationships with other first-year students. Students reported similarly positive interactions with faculty, with 21 students (64%) reporting positive or mostly positive relationships with their instructors.

On the other hand, only 11 students (33%) reported positive or mostly positive relationships with upperclassmen in the department, and all but one of the remaining students (21, for 64%) reported an ambivalent “neither positive nor negative” response to the question. Further tracking of this point will be necessary, but the relationships between classes has traditionally been seen as an important part of the character of the department which has, anecdotally at least, been harmed after the COVID-19 epidemic and its fallout.

The final important items on the survey concerned who students turned to with academic issues, and who they turned to with any other issues. Multiple answers were allowed for these items, but for both students claimed overwhelmingly to turn to peers: for academic issues 64% of responses were a friend, either in the department (44%) or outside of it (20%), and for non-academic issues the number was 51%, evenly split between in-department and other friends. This is certainly unsurprising, as was the number of students who turned to family members for support (16% for academic issues, and 31% for other issues), but worrying to us was the number of students who responded that they turned to upperclassmen or faculty. Only 4% of responses for academic support were faculty, and 7% upperclassmen, while for non-academic issues it was 8% and 3% respectively.

Again, anecdotally the faculty in the department feel that the strength of the relationships between students and faculty, and between students of different academic years, is a particular strong point of departmental culture, which would work towards the sort of academic and social integration that Tinto suggests is so important to new students. In general, at this early stage of the study, results suggest that while students seem to be integrating smoothly as a class of first-year students, with friendships being formed among peers and reliance on one another for both academic and non-academic issues, but these connections with faculty and peer supporters would appear to be less strong than we would like.

Moving Forward

This is, of course, the first exploratory year of a planned ongoing study, so much will only be made more clear with the collection of more data over time. The plan is to track how different incoming classes’ situations and experiences are similar or different, and how any changes to integrational and support policies and activities moving forward change these experiences and outlooks as we move into a post-COVID environment and try to recover from what the researchers perceive as damage to the social structure of the department caused by the pandemic. We will also track students’ experiences through their academic careers to see whether time improves the areas these initial findings suggest are lacking.

The goal is to try to create a picture of how well we as a department are serving the students that the literature suggests are “at risk” for not succeeding academically or leaving university, especially first-generation students and/or those coming from high schools with less-rigorous preparation for university. We will try to follow both students who thrive in the department, and those who struggle, to try to get a clearer picture of how we are helping the former group succeed, and how we might be failing the latter.

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