

# A brief overview of lifelong learning in Japan

## Keywords

lifelong learning, lifelong education, social education, *shougai gakushuu*, *shakai kyouiku*

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) takes the position that lifelong learning, or *shougai gakushuu*, encompasses not only structured learning through schooling and social education but also learning that takes place through sports, cultural activities, hobbies, recreation, and volunteer activities. This article presents an overview of lifelong learning in Japan, beginning with a brief historical outline of its development, from the Act for Adult Education of 1949 to the current national policy. Survey data on the extent of participation in lifelong learning opportunities is presented and followed by a discussion of the government's current rationale and strategies for the promotion and advancement of lifelong learning in Japan. Societal factors challenging MEXT's prioritization of lifelong learning are also discussed.

文部科学省は生涯学習に対して以下の見解を示している。すなわち、生涯学習とは、学校教育や社会教育を通じた体系立った学習のみならず、スポーツ、文化的活動、趣味、レクリエーション、そしてボランティア活動を通じた学習も含まれる、という見解である。本論は、日本における生涯学習の概要を提示する。具体的には、まず、1949年の社会教育法から今日の国策に至るまでの日本における生涯学習の発展の歴史的概況を示す。そして、どの程度生涯学習に参加しているかの調査データを示し、日本における生涯学習促進に関する政策を論じる。さらには、生涯学習に高い重要性を与えている文部科学省が直面する社会的課題についても論議する。

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### Bio data

Anthony C. Ogden is the director of education abroad at the University of Kentucky. He completed his Ph.D. at Pennsylvania State University in Educational Theory and Policy with a dual title in Comparative and International Education. Anthony's recent publications include *The view from the veranda: Understanding today's colonial student* (Ogden, 2008) and *Ethnographic inquiry: Reframing the learning core of education abroad* (Ogden, 2006). Both articles were published in *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Abroad*. He has a forthcoming publication in the *Journal of Studies in International Education* entitled, *Initial development and validation of the global citizenship scale*. Anthony lived in Japan for over eleven years, during which time he served as the Director for the Tokyo Center of the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) and as a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies <a.ogden@uky.edu>.



Educators and the general public use many different terms to refer to activities in the realm of adult education. In Japan, *social education* and *lifelong learning* are the terms most frequently used to describe adult educational activities. From the late 1940s to the mid 1980s, social education (*shakai kyouiku*) referred to organized educational activities for adults and young people other than those provided in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools or at institutions of higher education (Gordon, 1998; Rausch, 2003). Even though this kind of education does not necessarily lead to specific vocational or professional qualifications, participants are motivated by intellectual curiosity, improvement in quality of life, or fun and

pleasure. Lifelong learning (*shougai gakushuu*) encompasses learning that takes place at all stages of life, whether formal learning at school or in daily life (Maruyama, 2009; Okamoto, 1996). Consequently, this includes all types of social education activities (Gordon, 1998; Rausch, 2003). Lifelong learning has been the term most commonly used in Japan since the mid 1980s to describe adult education activities.

According to Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), lifelong learning comprises two main aspects, “the concept to comprehensively review various systems including education in order to create a lifelong learning society and the concept of learning at all stages of life” (MEXT, 2009, p. 1). MEXT takes the position that lifelong learning encompasses not only structured learning through school and social education but also learning that takes place through sports, cultural activities, hobbies, recreation, and volunteer activities. Its official statement on lifelong learning currently reads, “In order to create an enriching and dynamic society in the 21st century, it is vital to form a lifelong learning society in which people can freely choose learning opportunities at any time during their lives and in which proper recognition is accorded to those learning achievements” (MEXT, 2009, p. 2).

This paper offers an introduction to lifelong learning in Japan, beginning with a brief historical overview of its development and the current national policy on lifelong learning. This will be followed with basic survey data on the extent of participation in lifelong learning opportunities.

After a discussion of the rationale for lifelong learning, several national strategies for the promotion of lifelong learning will be discussed. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of contemporary barriers to lifelong learning.

### Historical Overview

The history of contemporary adult education in Japan stretches back to 1949, when the Act for Adult Education was enacted (Fuwa, 2001). Emphasizing that learning occurs throughout one’s lifespan, the law aimed to contribute to the building of a democratic Japanese society and to extend the Fundamental Law of Education, which was enacted in 1947 following World War II as a statement of the purposes and principles of Japanese education (Gordon, 1998). The act defined the roles of the national, prefectural, and municipal education bodies, encouraged the establishment of adult education centers (*kouminkan*) in communities throughout Japan, and provided local governments with financial subsidies to do so (Fuwa, 2001; Maruyama, 2009). There are now nearly 18,000 *kouminkan* located throughout the country (MEXT, 2009).

The idea of *lifelong education* was not introduced in Japan until the 1970s. It was identified as a concept relevant for Japanese society following the publication of UNESCO’s Faure Report in 1972 (Faure, et al., 1972). Japan is said to have been one of the few countries to make a serious attempt to implement the recommendations of that groundbreaking report (Wilson, 2001). It was to be another ten years before the term *lifelong*

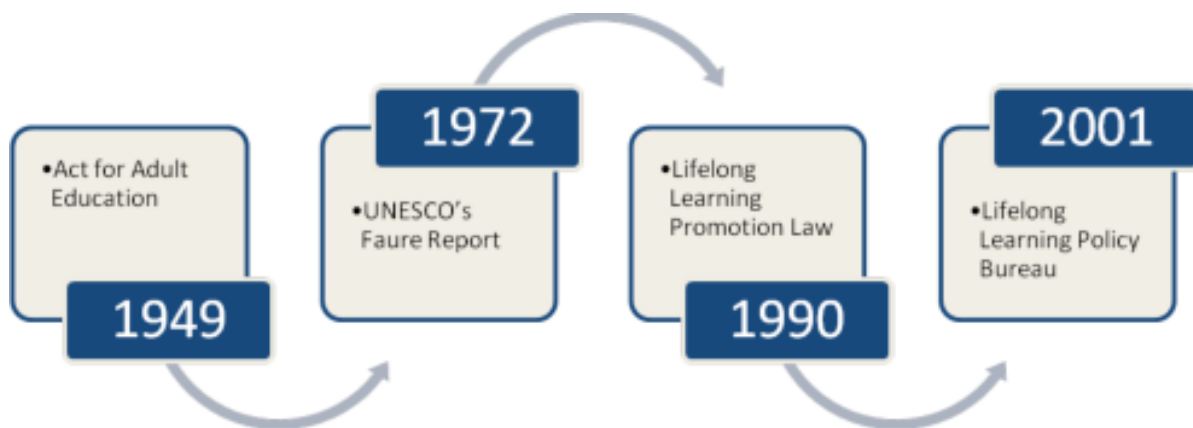


Figure 1. Historical timeline of lifelong learning in Japan

*learning* would be used officially in Japan. In 1982, the National Central Advisory Committee for Education (NCACE) addressed the original concepts of lifelong education and lifelong learning, clarifying the inter-relationship between the two. NCACE released a second report in 1990 that suggested to the government that it establish promotional systems and administrative divisions for the development of lifelong learning throughout Japan.

Shortly thereafter in 1990, the Law Concerning the Development of Implementation Systems and Other Measures for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning (or Lifelong Learning Promotion Law) was established. This law provided for the establishment of Lifelong Learning Councils at national and prefectural levels, support for local promotion of lifelong learning, provisions for development of lifelong learning in designated communities, and surveys for assessing the learning needs of prefectural residents (Gordon, 1998). It also established the National Advisory Committee for Lifelong Learning (NACLL), which has since been folded into the Central Council for Education. The Central Council carries out research and deliberations on important matters related to the promotion of education. A Lifelong Learning Subdivision was subsequently established within the Central Council to focus on lifelong learning issues.

Just over a decade later in 2001, MEXT was established through a ministerial restructuring. MEXT then established the Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, which remains today as the central organization responsible for the coordination of MEXT's educational policies to promote lifelong learning. The Bureau plans and drafts policy, conducts research and analysis on the state of domestic and overseas education, and strives to promote policies on information technology. It promotes social education and develops various lifelong learning opportunities related to gender equality. The Bureau is also responsible for the maintenance and enhancement of the University of the Air and the advancement of specialized training college education (MEXT, 2009).

After sixty years, the Fundamental Law on Education was amended in 2006. This law, which articulates the fundamental purpose and principles of Japanese education, now provides

that, "Society shall be made to allow all citizens to continue to learn throughout their lives, on all occasions and in all places, and apply the outcomes of lifelong learning appropriately to refine themselves and leading a fulfilling life" (MEXT, 2006, Article 3).

### **Current lifelong learning and social education policy**

Since the 1990s, the notion of lifelong learning has become increasingly well understood in Japan. In a national opinion survey conducted in 2000, 74% of the respondents were already familiar with the term (Yamaguchi, 2001). Lifelong learning opportunities are now readily available throughout the country and enjoy the support of both local and national governments. Central to these efforts is MEXT and its policies concerning lifelong learning in Japan. In fact, 8.5% of MEXT's 2007 fiscal year budget was allocated to lifelong learning, or the equivalent of 452.5 billion yen (MEXT, 2007). National policies focus on the following three strategic areas.

### **Toward the realization of a lifelong learning society**

Japan is moving steadily toward its goal of realizing a lifelong learning society in which all people can participate in learning opportunities any time during their lives and receive recognition for their achievements. To achieve this will require that a comprehensive and diverse range of learning opportunities be developed and promoted. MEXT states that this will help in the development of human resources which in turn will significantly contribute to the overall development of both the society and the economy.

### **Promotion of social education and support for family education**

Recognizing that social education plays a key role in the realization of a lifelong learning society, MEXT is determined to promote programs to ensure that all strata of society, including young people, the elderly, and women, are able to participate in social education opportunities. This involves volunteer activities to deepen the sense of community among local residents, opportunities for parents to create networks to

support child-rearing in local communities, and other activities such as audio-visual education and human rights education.

**Improving the learning environment and enhancing learning opportunities**

MEXT is taking measures to improve the systems for promoting lifelong learning. This includes improving the learning infrastructure on a national scale and providing support to local governments and the private sector for the improvement of facilities such as public halls and libraries as well as social correspondence education and culture centers.

**Contemporary trends on lifelong learning participation**

In 1999, the Public Relations Office of the Cabinet Office conducted a survey (MEXT, 2000) to measure the extent of lifelong learning in Japan, focusing particularly on the type of activities offered, patterns of participation, reasons for participating, and overall participation rates within the public sector (Yamaguchi, 2001). This section shares some of those results.

**Types of participation in lifelong learning**

Enjoying hobbies and interests, such as music, fine arts, flower arrangement, dance, and calligraphy were among the leading lifelong learning activities (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Types of participation in lifelong learning**

Type of participation	%age
Hobby & interest (flower arrangement, calligraphy, etc.)	22.0%
Health & sport	21.7%
Knowledge and skills necessary for work	9.4%
Domestic skills (cooking, sewing, dressmaking, etc.)	8.0%
Knowledge & skills for volunteer activities (sign language, etc.)	6.4%

Type of participation	%age
Culture (literature, history, etc.)	6.2%
Social issues (current social issues, international issues, the environment, etc.)	5.0%
Foreign language	4.4%
Child-rearing & education	3.0%
Other	0.6%
None in particular	54.7%
Don't know	0.5%

**Reasons for participating in lifelong learning**

When asked about the reasons for participating in lifelong learning activities, the majority of respondents said they did so because they enjoy learning and it enriches their lives (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Reasons for participating in lifelong learning**

Reasons for participating	%age
Enrich my own life	52.4%
Help maintain or improve my health	43.1%
Use in my daily life or local activities	25.1%
Use in my job or to find a job	24.5%
Acquire further knowledge and skills	17.9%
Use in volunteer work	11.9%
Acquire qualifications	11.5%
Use to instruct other people with learning or cultural activities	9.8%
Do not use	7.6%
Other	0.1%
Don't know	0.7%

Every three years, the Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau conducts a national survey on social education administration in Japan published

as the Social Education Survey (*Shakai Kyoiku Chosa*). Conducted since 1955, the survey seeks to recognize trends and clarify conditions of facilities and activities regarding social education in Japan. The 2004 survey was composed of several component surveys, including administration of social education, citizen's public halls, libraries, museums, educational facilities for children and youths, and women's educational centers (MEXT, 2005).

### **Trends in number of users of social education facilities**

Physical education and social sports facilities were the most popular venue among all social education facilities with just over 466 million users, accounting for multiple uses (MEXT, 2005). The next most frequented facility was citizens public halls with over 230 million users (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Trends in number of users of social education facilities (1,000 persons)**

Type of facility	2001	2004	% change
Public sports facilities	440,590	466,617	5.9%
Citizen's public halls ( <i>Kouminkan</i> )	222,677	233,115	4.7%
Library	143,100	170,611	1.9%
Private sports facilities	156,716	157,647	0.59%
Museum-related facilities	155,526	154,828	-0.45%
Museum	113,977	117,854	3.4%
Youth education facilities	20,766	20,864	0.47%
Women's education centers	3,315	2,850	-14.0%

Compared with 2001 data, the number of classes and seminars held by agencies or facilities of social education increased overall by

approximately 11% in 2004 (MEXT, 2005). There were decreases however in the number of classes or seminars offered by boards of education and prefectural offices, roughly 1.6% and 9.8%, respectively (see Table 4). The number of overall persons participating in classes and seminars has generally increased by approximately 4%. Typical lifelong learning participants live in rural areas, are unemployed middle-aged females, or adults over the age of 65 (Laken, 2007). The majority are typically middle class and interested in hobby-based activities (Fuwa, 2001; Rausch, 2003).

**Table 4. Social education classes/seminars held by agency/facility and number of participants**

Agency	Total number of classes/seminars held	Number of participants
Board of Education	164,632	7,972,707
Prefectural offices	207,793	8,087,092
Citizen's public halls ( <i>Kouminkan</i> )	428,473	12,456,887
Museums	17,663	1,421,025
Museum-related facilities	20,771	1,119,949
Youth education facilities	16,718	615,889
Women's education centers	7,555	234,325
Culture centers	56,632	1,728,964

### **Rationale for lifelong learning and contemporary initiatives**

Not unlike other nations in the world, the Japanese are being challenged to constantly acquire new knowledge and skills in order to keep pace with the issues affecting their society and economy, including advances in science and technology, the increasing use of sophisticated information technology, globalization, and

changes in the industrial structure. Recognizing these global challenges, MEXT offers a comprehensive rationale for the need to create a lifelong learning society in Japan, which can be summarized in four points.

### **Lifelong learning is needed to respond to social and economic change**

In its report, *What Japan Can Teach the United States: Lifelong Learning in an Era of Change*, the American Council on Education (ACE) identified two major societal shifts in Japan which have been at the forefront of MEXT's approach toward the promotion of lifelong learning: disconnected young adults and workers in transition (Lakin, 2007). The report states, "...because of the high level of academic pressure, the excessive focus on academic credentials, and patterns of bullying in school settings, an increasing number of young people have refused to attend school or drop out" (Lakin, 2007, para. 4). MEXT is working to re-engage these young adults by partnering with universities and regional businesses to provide lifelong learning opportunities. For example, MEXT introduced the High School Equivalency Exam in 2005, which may be used for university entrance or as a credential for employment (Lake, 2007). With challenges brought on by rapid globalization, a prolonged economic downturn, and the disappearance of lifetime jobs, there will likely be an increased demand for continuing education. MEXT is working to enable workers in transition to receive training and pursue postsecondary opportunities (Gordon, 1998; Maruyama, 2009; Rausch, 2003). These factors, combined with the popularity of English language education and Japanese youth's interest in all things computer-related, could conceivably stimulate demand for new virtual or e-learning methods for EFL education (Dracopoulos, 2003).

### **Lifelong learning is needed to remedy the harmful effects of Japanese society's preoccupation with academic credentials**

Japan's intense focus on academic credentials has sometimes overshadowed the importance of participation in lifelong learning (Lakin, 2007). MEXT recognizes that there is a need to create a social environment in which appropriate value

is placed on learning achievement at all stages of life, regardless of whether the learning is accompanied by formal academic credentials.

### **Lifelong learning is needed to respond to the increased demand for learning activities for a maturing society**

Wilson (2001) describes lifelong learning in Japan as a lifeline for a maturing society. The maturation of Japanese society as evidenced by the aging of the population is reflected in an increasing demand for learning activities. In fact, Japan is aging more rapidly than any other industrialized country and by 2015, one in four Japanese will be over age 65 (United Nations, 2007). MEXT recognizes this growing need for lifelong learning opportunities for older adults and is funding courses on mental and physical health, traditional arts, and community activism, to list but a few (Gordon, 1998; Kawachi, 2008; Young & Rosenberg, 2006).

### **Lifelong learning is needed to revive and improve the educational strengths of the home and the local community**

Due in part to declining fertility rates (Ogawa, 2005) and increased urban migration, MEXT states that Japanese people have begun to adopt a privatized lifestyle. MEXT is concerned that cultural practices are being lost. As such, social education programming is seen as a means through which to preserve Japanese culture. Maehira (1994) stated over a decade ago that lifelong learning could potentially help re-integrate Japan's minority populations, such as the *buraku* population and Japanese-Koreans, through providing literacy classes and giving official recognition to the already on-going night schools that offer literacy classes (Wilson, 2001; Young & Rosenberg, 2006).

In response to this rationale for fostering a lifelong learning society in Japan, MEXT is working at both national and local levels to expand comprehensive lifelong learning opportunities. The three most visible national strategies include the University of the Air, Educational Information Satellite Communications Network (EL-NET) Open College and *Manabi Pia*, or Lifelong Learning Festivals. The University of the Air was



founded in 1983 and began accepting students in 1985. The institution has the potential to make an especially important contribution to lifelong learning in Japan as it is accessible to all, without the customary entrance examination. Students can enroll in non-degree or degree courses which are provided through public television and radio (Kawanobe, 1994, 1999; Rausch, 2003; Yamaguchi, 2001). As of 2007, its enrollment stood at 89,422. Launched in 1999, EL-NET is a comprehensive network that broadcasts all manner of information on education, culture, and sports nationwide. EL-NET provides training for teachers and others working in education, educational programs for children, and university extension courses as an open college (Yamaguchi, 2001). To raise awareness of lifelong learning, MEXT hosts national lifelong learning festivals in collaboration with local governments and others. The 21st annual festival known as *Manabi Pia* was held in October 2009 in Saitama prefecture. These festivals offer nationwide presentations of various learning activities.

Additionally, Japan's first on-line university providing virtual courses opened in 2007. Cyber University was approved as part of the nation's deregulation efforts aimed at revitalizing economic and business activities. Cyber University is a four-year, degree granting institution that allows students to receive classes anytime and anyplace via personal computers and even more recently, via one's own cellular phone. The institution provides busy professionals unparalleled flexibility as students can take lessons whenever and wherever they wish. Not surprisingly, most of its approximately 2,000 students are in their late 20s and early 30s and many hold full-time jobs. This reinforces the awareness of and need for expanding lifelong learning opportunities in Japan.

### Barriers to lifelong learning in Japan

In spite of MEXT's prioritization of lifelong learning, there are several factors which have challenged its success. Although the Lifelong Learning Promotion Law of 1990 raised the profile of lifelong learning in Japan, Makino (1997) asserted it shifted responsibilities for adult education from the local boards of education to prefectural offices. This shift has brought higher

levels of centralized bureaucratic direction and control of lifelong learning which has led to problems and inefficiencies (Gordon, 1998; Rausch, 2003). For example, Yamaguchi (2001) pointed to the *demai kouza* strategy employed by many prefectural governments, a scheme through which classes are dispatched by the prefectural government at the request of local citizens. In actuality, these classes are seldom requested and as such, the strategy is viewed as an example of the failure of the shift toward centralized organization of lifelong learning activities.

There are three other major factors which are challenging MEXT's efforts. Firstly, there has been limited adult access to higher education in Japan. Japanese universities in general provide few opportunities for adults to participate in higher education, whether for degree programs or for taking individual classes apart from a degree program (Doyon, 2001; Gordon, 1998; Rausch, 2003). Universities generally do not transfer credits earned at other institutions. In fact, it is rare for students outside the ages of 18 to 22 to attend university classes in Japan. The 2004 reform of higher education in Japan promised to address these issues and there has been focus in recent years on reconsidering the university entrance examination system (Doyon, 2001; Kawachi, 2008).

Secondly, there is undue importance given to formal education in Japan. According to Gordon (1998), Japanese society emphasizes a person's academic career, stressing formal primary and secondary schooling and the prestige of the university a person attends. Thus, the society continues to distinguish between two distinct stages in life, the learning stage prior to early adulthood and the work stage after university or high school graduation. This distinction remains a barrier to lifelong learning. Related to this, Fuwa (2001) states that Japanese society values a degree of professionalism or credentialism that most lifelong learning programs are unable to provide.

Finally, Kelly (1998) notes that there is a strong tradition in Japanese education favoring content mastery. The traditional teacher-centered classroom can be de-motivating for adult learners who ultimately have a choice about taking

up learning activities or not. This is perhaps especially relevant to EFL or other instruction targeting adult learners.

## Conclusion

The issues raised in this brief overview of lifelong learning in Japan illustrate the rather remarkable extent to which Japan has embraced the idea of lifelong learning. Stretching back to the late 1940s, Japan has made impressive strides toward its goal of becoming a lifelong learning society. The idea of lifelong learning is now well understood and increasingly embraced within Japanese society. Its importance is shared and explicitly supported by government at all levels. Considering the future of lifelong learning in Japan, it is clear that there are both old and new challenges which need to be addressed, particularly with regard to changing demographics, economic development, and maintaining a sense of community in a society that is increasingly becoming more individualistic (Wilson, 2001). However, there is little doubt that Japan will continue its impressive progress toward becoming a lifelong learning society in which all its people can participate in learning opportunities any time during their lives.

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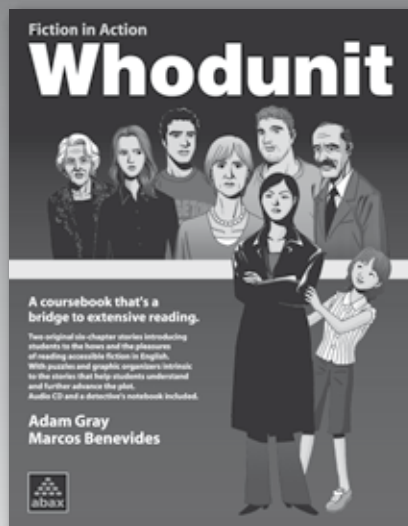
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