The Obscure Profile of Distance Learning in Japan

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Introduction

This presentation provides information on historical and current distance learning in Japan. Distance education is prevalent in Japan, where it has been incorporated into people’s lives for over 100 years. Despite the importance of distance education in Japan, its existence has not been well researched or appreciated outside of the country. This presentation provides a history of systematic distance education in Japan and presents a tentative model for describing the current distance education structure in Japan. Distance education processes have been better documented for higher education, but this paper sheds light on the current state of e-learning based distance education outside of higher education and the official school systems. Analyses of statistics and examples reveal specific features of e-learning based distance education, which are tailored for specific needs and demands of digital native students and adult learners in and- out of the country.

Background and History

The Origin of Systematic Distance Education in Japan

Two scholars, Tanaka (1978) and Amano (1994), performed detailed archival studies of distance education in Japan. The development of private universities in Japan coincided with the origin of systematic distance education. These private universities often had political orientations that were different from those of the former imperial universities, the latter being the equivalent of current national universities. Tanaka confirmed that the origin of systematic distance education in higher education went at least as far back as the Meiji Period (1868-1912), during which university “lecture transcripts” were mailed to off-campus students. This observation signifies that from an early age the Japanese higher education system already incorporated dual-modes of instruction, including internal, on-campus students, and external, distant students.

The “lecture transcript” delivery began almost simultaneously in several traditional private universities, including Chuo University (1885), Hosei University (1885), Waseda University (1886), Toyo University (1887), and Nihon University (1890), among others. These five universities are relevant because they have continued this tradition of major dual-mode institutions, even with interruptions due to wars and other factors. Keio University, another recognized dual-mode university, incorporated distance education relatively late, in 1948 (Keio University Correspondence Courses, 2004), although the university opened in 1858 (Keio University, n.d.). The establishment of distance education programs at Tamagawa University (another recognized dual-mode university in teacher education) and the re-establishment of other existing dual-mode universities immediately after World War II under the new School Education Law (Association of Private Distance Education Universities, 1999) created a strong tradition and practice of distance education.

As early as 1908, the current Japan Women’s University, established its Women’s Distance Education Association and began delivering its lecture transcripts on domestic science in 1909 (Japan Women’s University, n.d.). The interest in women’s education in distance education predates this program, however. Although the relation between distance education and women’s education remains obscure, lecture transcripts on “distance education and domestic science” written by Uryu (1889) are still available today, making up the first of the 12-volume domestic science classics collection (re-printed in 1982).

The earliest extant original copy of these lecture transcripts by a university (Lecture Transcript Volume 13) is from 1885 from Chuo University. It was acquired by Chuo University’s history section in January 2012, thus substantiating this long history (Yamazaki, 2010). Although private sector development of distance education offerings can be traced back to an advertisement in the Boston Globe in 1728, Isaac Pitman’s shorthand lessons in
1840s in the UK, the direct involvement by a university, and the provision of university credit for completion in Japan seem to predate most other countries’ development of similar services, with the exception of the University of London in 1858 and Illinois Wesleyan University in the USA in 1878.

The Current State of Distance Education in Japan

Three layers of Distance Education in Japan
At least three layers can be recognized within the social structure of distance education providers in Japan (Figure 1). The first layer includes students enrolled in the formal school systems under the control of the official School Education Law and the Distance Education School Law, which cover distance education universities, junior colleges, high schools, and junior high schools.

Figure 1. Three Layers of Distance Education in Japan

The second layer, which is called “social distance education” and has been supported by the Social Distance Education Law since 1949 (MEXT, 2011b), may be less well known. Schools and private organizations provide approximately 75,000 students with 113 distance education courses in office skills, engineering, and other life skills considered useful for job training, to which MEXT provides financial support and postal fees for the course (MEXT, 2011a). MEXT has held an annual ceremony to award learners for their accomplishments since 1950; it also has sought to encourage students who complete their courses to become “lifelong instructors” and helpers to other learners since 1992. In other words, this program is designed to create a systematic cycle of lifelong learning (Nihhon Association of Distance Education, 2009). This second layer, which is open to a wider range of lifelong learners, is worth careful attention, given the enrollment size of approximately 77,000 students at the Open University of Japan (OUJ), another publically supported, private, open- and dual-mode institution in the first layer.

The third layer includes numerous distance education courses and programs developed and delivered outside the official school systems. These courses have been providing learning opportunities to large numbers of students without their numbers officially being recorded, as described below.

E-learning Distance Education in Higher Education
The history and current status of distance education in higher education in Japan has been much better documented (Center of ICT and Distance Education, n.d.) than other areas of distance learning; thus, only updates focused on online learning in this formal sector are provided here.

According to e-Gov (2012), in 2012 and with the approval of the Distance Education Universities Law, 27 undergraduate, 10 graduate, and 17 undergraduate-graduate institutions, and 11 distance education junior colleges are authorized to provide distance learning programs. Distance education higher institutions are run privately (100%, including OUJ) and most are dual-mode (89%), although this could change over time. Currently seven universities are single mode and focus exclusively on distance education. Three of these offer only undergraduate programs, one
offers only graduate programs, two offer both undergraduate and graduate programs, and one is a junior college; all of these universities show a high e-learning orientation (http://www.gakkou.net/spc/daigaku/spc005/), presumably a natural consequence of not having campus-based students. The number of undergraduates is 217,236 (or 7.8% of the total undergraduate students), and the number of graduate students is 8,241 (or 2.9%) (e-Gov, 2012).

Some programs at Tohoku and Shinshu Universities deliver on-demand video lectures combined with campus-based meetings, in a form of blended learning. The Graduate School of Instructional System at Kumamoto University offers specialized e-learning graduate programs and serves distance learning students in all parts of Japan. Although interpretations differ, these programs are not in the same category as single- or dual-mode universities and, according to our definition, are considered traditional national university corporations (confirmed by MEXT, Lifelong Policy Department, Survey Planning division, School General Survey section).

**E-learning Distance Education in Secondary Education**

Distance education high schools once had been regarded as a safeguard for students with difficulty adapting to traditional learning modes. Recent statistics indicate that these schools serve a broader function, however.

As of 2011 (e-Gov, 2012), 210 distance education high schools with 188,251 students (5.6% of all high school students) exist and include 89 single-mode and 121 dual-mode institutions. The single-mode high schools include 7 public and 82 private institutions, and the dual-mode high schools include 73 public and 137 private institutions. Some of these schools have an enrollment size of several thousand, but many are much smaller, with a size of approximately one hundred students. A sharp increase in the number of distance education high schools should be noted, especially in the private sector. Since 2001, 98 new private schools have opened, in contrast with the 35 that existed up until 2000 (Chiyonobu, 2011; e-Gov, 2012).

Figure 2 presents MEXT statistics (2011a) on the percentage of Japanese high school students receiving distance education, which has been continually increasing, especially for female students.

![Figure 2: The Chronological Increase in the Percentage of High School Students Receiving Distance Education Over the Past Decade](image-url)

Figure 3 shows the chronological change in the enrollment numbers at public and private distance education high schools. The enrollment numbers at public institutions are decreasing, whereas those at private institutions are increasing. Whether an effect of this change or not, the number of high school students attending traditional high schools is also decreasing. With the continual decrease in youths able to attend high school (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications/Bureau of Statistics, 2012) in Japan, the rise of students who “choose” the distance mode is noteworthy.
Several comprehensive portals help students and parents learn about distance education programs and curricula for high school students (http://stepup-school.net/, http://manabi-subete.com/tsushin/, http://www.tsuushinsei-navi.com/). To collect information for this section, school prospectuses were also consulted, and telephone interviews were conducted in some cases for clarification.

Flexibility in the learning mode available through distance learning programs seems to be a predominant factor in students’ decisions to undertake this educational path. For example, even the schools under the Distance Education High School Law provide numerous choices regarding the frequency of attending face-to-face classes (e.g., five days a week, two days a week, a few times a month, or only once a year) or the use of print resources, the Internet, or mobile phones. In many programs, students can choose the best combination of learning modes within the same school. As of March 2012, several schools offer quasi-complete e-learning. Some schools offer entrance into one school that is then combined with the so-called “support school” system across the country, with varied focuses, from job training to preparation for university entrance examinations. Students thus can customize their own high school curriculum. The category of “international distance education high school” deserves attention; a growing number of schools collaborate with overseas institutions in the UK, U.S., and Germany, for example. Among these schools, some offer distance learning programs that allow high school students in Japan or overseas to study in the language of their choice and receive a high school diploma from the overseas country (in some cases, receiving one diploma from Japan and another from the target country).

Currently, only two distance education junior high schools exist, one in Tokyo and the other in Osaka. Both are under the Distance Education Junior High School Law initiated in 1947. Because its primary aim is to provide junior-high-school-level education to those who graduated from elementary schools “before 1946” (Article 2), the number of learners who fulfill this entry qualification is rapidly decreasing. Currently, MEXT has stopped surveying this category.

**E-learning distance education outside of school systems**

The third layer of distance education includes the numerous multi-purpose, distance learning courses and programs that support Japanese learners with a wide variety of motivations and needs. Exact statistical data for the number of distance learners in this category were not found.

These “schools” (designated as such although they have not been officially approved) are usually in the private sector and are focused primarily on helping people update their skills and knowledge in specific occupational areas (e.g., computing, editing, and kimono-making). Furthermore, they help learners prepare for national certification and qualification examinations (e.g., weather forecasters, librarians, accountants) and widen personal scope and interests (e.g., investment, storytelling, sake-tasting). Long-lasting comprehensive information portals exist (e.g., http://tsushin.keikotomanabu.net/, which covers approximately 612 distance learning courses offered by 116 private sectors), which help students choose the best course for their specific purpose.

It is part of Japanese custom for employed workers to update their office and managerial skills, often discretely and for the personal value of doing so, without waiting for financial support from the workplace. These needs are most
commonly fulfilled by private-sector professional schools, including the well-established TAC (http://www.tac-school.co.jp/) and LEC (http://www.lec.jp.com/). These schools address the needs of both individual and corporate training. Both schools are noteworthy in providing sophisticated e-learning and mobile learning courses with various specialized professional contents, combined with a Q&A online tutoring system. TAC has had solid experience in postal-based distance education since its establishment in 1980 as a dual-mode “school.” Its online version, which is called “Web School,” opened in 2001. Among the approximately 217,000 enrollees at TAC, approximately 65,100 (30%) are studying in distance mode (among them, 70% are company employees, and 30% are students in higher education).

Another deep-rooted aspect of distance learning culture includes the “prep schools” that provide general learning support and specific support for success on entrance examinations for students from preschool to high school. Digitization, sometimes called “Net Prep,” is also visible in this sector. In many cases, these schools deliver courses online as on-demand video lectures, possibly taken during on-site classes, with Q&A tutors available via telephone, e-mail, and fax. It is quite common for a large prep school that has several campus buildings to share live lecture sessions via television or video conferencing and then archive the sessions as lecture videos. In addition to the above-mentioned distance education high schools, some prep schools allow enrollment from overseas. These schools deliver the course materials online or by post to support students overseas as they prepare to return to Japanese territory, resulting in a form of global distance education.

In the cases of both professional schools and prep schools, students commonly belong concurrently to two “schools,” the first in the face-to-face mode and the second in the distance mode. The dual-mode learning, therefore, is planned and realized on an individual level.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As described above, distance education is prevalent throughout various stages of people’s lives in Japan. Japanese people enjoy learning and are increasingly interested in and open to learning at a distance. Japan’s widespread acceptance of distance learning may result from at least two socio-cultural factors: the duality of Japanese culture and economy, wherein the “official” is supported by the “unofficial,” and the social custom of going to traditional campus-based schools for only a certain (younger) stage of life. After the fixed study period, students have no choice but to rely on unofficial methods of learning if they wish to continue acquiring knowledge.

A notable feature of many e-learning courses offered in Japan is the video lecture. Many distance education institutions provide dual-mode instruction; thus, e-learning is a reasonable and cost-efficient way of recycling existing resources from face-to-face components. Obvious advantages of video lectures include the high adaptability to mobile learning (existing materials can be delivered on the Internet) and the ease of updating content (the resource is continually updated in real-time face-to-face classes). The shift to mobile learning, which allows for even higher flexibility and mobility than the Internet, therefore, may be rapid. The challenge, however, is that the pedagogical rationale and effectiveness of such instructive models is coming under increasing pressure from pedagogies and technologies that demand and support more interactive models of teaching and learning (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

The gradual growth in the number of high school students receiving distance education is informative. Japan supports almost the same number of distance learners in higher education and as in secondary schools. This rise may or may not be present in other countries; it is reasonable to regard these students as forming a reserve army of digital learners in higher education and beyond, not only in Japan but in a globally networked learning system. The effects of this shift will be soon evident because the span of high school is only three years long.

Undergraduate education lasts four years in most cases in Japan. In contrast, the life expectancy in Japan is 83 years, which is the longest in the world (WHO, 2012). The other layers and life periods are also important and of increasing interest to those with a passion for lifelong learning. The trends of the other layers should be equally researched and documented to consider distance education as a whole in Japan.
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