

Impact Objectives

- Provide a way to evaluate a Junior College in an efficient, effective and sustainable manner
- Demonstrate the way in which Junior Colleges fulfil an essential educational role

Assessing higher education

Assistant Professor Shinichi Yamazaki talks about the quantitative and qualitative approaches and thinking behind the National Survey for Junior College Students in Japan



What are the gaps in our understanding you are hoping to address through your research?

Through this research, we are hoping people will understand that, although the quality assurance of educational institutions is indispensable, it has never been more important than the actual education and research at universities, including Junior Colleges. Originally, higher educational institutions in Japan have operated largely independently, but in recent years the authority of the Japanese Government and the ministries over the universities has become stronger. This results in institutions simply following governmental policy. With discussions on cost-effectiveness and accountability of educational institutions, evaluations were accepted as a matter of course. Various surveys were conducted, and data were provided to various bodies. However, these are adversely affecting the quality of education and research by assessing in a very narrow way. Using the results of this research, we will show that it is possible to evaluate a Junior College in an efficient, effective and sustainable manner,

and we would like to create an environment where Junior Colleges can fulfil their essential educational role.

What study methods are you using in this research?

Research related to NSJCS, including this one, considers both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach is an analysis of the aggregated results of questionnaires from Junior College students. We typically analyse these with SPSS and Microsoft Excel. The qualitative approach is done through semi-structured group interviews. We then use the results of the interviews to better understand the results of the questionnaires. Therefore, the focus of all my research is that it combines quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Can you talk about the importance of close collaboration with other academic institutions to your research?

Collaboration is an essential element in the proper undertaking and promotion of this research. In particular, Osamu Sakai at Oita University has been key in developing NSJCS. When we revised the

2014 questionnaire completely, we not only conducted various research studies jointly, but also developed a wide range of novel ideas through many heated and productive discussions!

We have a number of researchers involved in this work. Shota Miyazato is currently enrolled in the doctoral programme at the Graduate School of J. F. Oberlin University. Miyazato has a solid knowledge of pedagogy and psychology, and his perspective is slightly different. He has been helpful in advancing the NSJCS with his review of the survey. Haiyu Huang is a researcher for the Japan Association for College Accreditation, and her main roles related to this research are the administrative procedures in the NSJCS and the interaction with the people in-charge of the Junior Colleges. Since I and the other researchers involved in this research belong to a 4-year university, it is usually difficult for us to connect with the people involved in junior colleges, so Huang's involvement is indispensable to grasp the needs and desires of the junior colleges in the field. She specialises in the educational system and educational legislation, and is well-versed in policies related to Junior College evaluation. ●



Learning about education

The Committee of the Japan Association for College Accreditation is working to develop effective quantitative and qualitative methods for understanding the nature of education at Junior Colleges in Japan

Higher education can serve several functions for society. In principle, it aspires to push the boundaries of learning, teaching and our understanding of the world. It also aims to offer people an education which will give them access to more intellectually complex technical jobs.

The nature and variety of higher education institutions has changed substantially in most developed countries over the last 50 years. It is only in the last couple of decades that attaining a higher education qualification has been deemed necessary for the majority of non-manual jobs. This has led to a massive expansion of higher education, especially 3- and 4-year university degrees. At the same time, governments have attempted to transform higher education to resemble markets where institutions compete to offer the best and most useful degrees.

Assistant Professor Shinichi Yamazaki is a researcher at J.F. Oberlin University in Tokyo and sits on the Committee of the Japan Association for College Accreditation. He has a keen interest in this field of research. Yamazaki observes that the changes in the style and purpose of education at higher education institutions can be seen in three key areas. 'Firstly, research has shifted to become more

focused on the policy aims of government as opposed to that decided by the research community,' he outlines. 'Secondly, the type of course and teaching offered has become more focused on emphasising consistency of experience for all students, and finally, the way the education is being assessed has changed to become narrower and more focused on employment outcomes.' He is concerned that the quality of an institution is measured by the employment rate and average salaries of its alumni, and so the question of how best to teach has tended to become less important.

Outside of the typical 4-year colleges and universities, the picture is a little different. These kinds of institutions tend to offer more vocational or highly specific qualifications. 'The student numbers for such courses have dropped in many regions, however this means that governmental oversight or interest in the industry is severely diminished,' comments Yamazaki. From his perspective, these institutions face a challenge to survive so they have more passion to advance through the educational assessment and research to support their existence. His role on the Japan Association for College Accreditation Committee helps with this work as the Association is designed to help higher education institutions evaluate their

educational courses in a way that can give a realistic 'view on the ground' of their course. At the same time, the Committee also looks to provide clear routes to the improvement of these courses.

JUNIOR COLLEGES IN JAPAN

Junior Colleges are key non-university higher education institutions in Japan. They typically provide shorter, more vocational courses that aim to: 'cultivate essential abilities and basic skills for working in industrial society and living life well'. Historically, when Japan did not encourage women into universities, Junior Colleges were where women would receive a certain amount of higher education, at least until they were married. For decades the number of women attending university in Japan has steadily increased. Whilst Junior Colleges have seen the overall numbers of students fall recently, women still account for a large percentage of all students attending these colleges.

The Junior Colleges tend to specialise in fields such as child education and health sciences, and Yamazaki and the Committee are working now to assess the education quality of these courses. This is done primarily through the National Survey for Junior College Students (NSJCS). However, Yamazaki says that given ►

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the relative unimportance of Junior Colleges to policy-makers, they have found an opportunity to develop and implement additional, and more thorough, methods of assessment. 'Attempts to evaluate universities are often extremely superficial, and there have been many disrespectful and unhelpful evaluations that do not lead to the improvement of educational settings,' he comments. 'Furthermore, the growing demand for information held by the universities from various organisations and the media hinders the original work of the faculty and staff, resulting to a decline in the quality of education.'

QUANTITY AND QUALITY

The survey itself aims to provide quantitative measures through a very wide range of factors. These include everything from access to computing and the amount of coursework, to how often discussions are conducted in class and how boring the course feels to the students. The students rate their answers to these questions on a numerical scale. These numbers can then be analysed statistically in a variety of ways in order to understand how courses are being perceived. Such quantitative data is helpful for pointing out extremes – areas of both excellence and underperformance will provide a clear picture of what is right and wrong. However, Yamazaki says that many questions will have answers that fall somewhere in the middle, and so it can be difficult to interpret and understand the information.

This is where Yamazaki and the Committee have been aiming to make improvements in the assessment process. They undertake to work with the different Junior College administrators and teachers to set up group interviews with students of the colleges. In addition, Yamazaki also speaks to the presidents, the principles, key faculty members and staff. All these interviews follow a semi-

structured approach where set topics are to be discussed but where the discussions are free to roam. The discussions and responses from these meetings are noted and form part of the overall assessment of the college. This qualitative data is, of course, more complex and nuanced than the quantitative surveys. Therefore, how best to conduct and interpret the results arising from them is constantly being reassessed by Yamazaki and the Committee. 'The interview results are considered from a multi-faceted and evolving perspective, where even the designers of the survey are constantly rethinking,' he highlights. 'Naturally it takes a lot of time to prepare for the interview and to consider the facts afterwards.'

NEW WAYS TO UNDERSTAND EDUCATION

The results of Yamazaki's approach to higher education assessment are the creation of unique and highly accurate overviews of the strengths and weaknesses of different Junior Colleges. However, Yamazaki believes the value of his survey lies not in the columns of advantage and disadvantage, but rather in the capturing of the unique nature of each Junior College. Naturally, his findings can be used by the Junior Colleges to help them design their courses and develop better learning environments. Yamazaki is working to make these results more accessible and easier to understand and interpret. Transfers across colleges are not common in Japan and so for prospective students to have a reliable way of choosing a college that will suit them is extremely valuable, which is part of Yamazaki's wide-ranging plans for the future of his work. 'This system can be used not only for the evaluation of junior colleges and improvement activities but also as a tool for Junior College students to look back on their own learning and for the applicants to know more about Junior Colleges,' he concludes. ●

Project Insights

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BIO

Dr Shinichi Yamazaki is an Assistant Professor at the J.F. Oberlin University in Japan. His PhD was in International Studies. Yamazaki's research focus is to develop the quality assurance system in Japanese Junior Colleges through applying the National Survey for Junior College Students.

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