

The Necessity of Shifting the Emphasis in Japanese Lifelong Learning: How to Survive in A “Super-Aged Society”

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Abstract

Over the few last decades, Japan has been experiencing an unprecedented demographic upheaval of rapid ageing and an extremely low birth rate, together with a dwindling population. In fact, people aged 65 and over accounted for 25.9% of the population as of 2014, and the total population is expected to fall by almost a third within the next 50 years. The nation has already reached the condition of being a “super-aged society” — with more than 20% of the population aged over 65— and it would have to take seriously possible countermeasures in order to tackle the problem. Yet, since the problem is rooted in a large number of different social factors, which have accumulated over a long period of time, negative implications remain for many aspects of society. Under these circumstances, the role of lifelong learning should be focused on to a greater extent, so that it might not only update the skills of the potential workforce, but also revitalize the whole of society. However, most elderly people tend to be reluctant to participate in vocational activities, while those who are wealthy tend to enjoy non-vocational subjects for their own interest. From an educational perspective, this paper indicates what is required of Japanese lifelong learning if it is to adjust to being a “super-aged society”. The findings suggest the necessity of shifting the current emphasis to involving more variety in both content and stakeholders in order to turn longevity into a valuable potential asset.

Keywords: lifelong learning, super-aged society, ageing

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Introduction

Global trends in population have created a much older world with more senior people, and it is expected that the global share of those aged 65 and over is going to increase from 8% in 2010 to 16% in 2050 (from 530.5 million in 2010 to 1.5 billion in 2050) [Pew Research Center 2014], due to long life expectancies, a decline in fertility rates and other reasons. Meanwhile, the world's population of children (aged 0–14) is expected to increase by only 10%, from 1.8 billion in 2010 to 2 billion in 2050, due to a long-term decline in birth rates. However, the way to treat the issue of ageing largely varies depending on the continent and the country. For example, according to the United Nations' estimates, Africa's population should more than double between 2010 and 2050, with the addition of 1.4 billion people, whilst Europe's population is expected to shrink by more than 30 million by 2050 [United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2015]. Among the varying situations of the world's countries, Japan stands out sharply, not only in Asia but also in the world as a whole, in terms of the number of those who are aged 65 and over (25.9%, as of 2014) as well as its high rate of ageing. The nation has already reached the condition of being a "super-aged society" according to the commonly-used UN's definition, with more than 20% of the population being over 65. It is also estimated that some countries, including Russia, Germany, Italy and Japan, are projected to experience population reductions in the near future.

Looking at the world's demographic trend, there is a debate about whether or not having a growing number of older people in society is a problem. According to one survey conducted by the Pew Research Center [2014], public concern with the growing number of older people is lower outside of East Asia and Europe, where the majorities of the populations are projected to be older than 50 by 2050. General concerns in those countries tend to include more negative aspects, such as fears that an ageing country will lose its economic vitality. In one sense, most parts of East Asia and Europe are expected to have greater numbers of people dependent on shrinking workforces (aged 15 to 64), while ageing elsewhere, such as in India and several African countries, is mostly driven by the ageing of children within the workforce, resulting in a potentially favourable demographic trend for the regions' economic growth. Therefore, it is said that the coming changes in world demographics could conceivably alter the distribution of global economic power.

In the countries experiencing rapid ageing and population shrinkage, the smaller working-age populations must support growing numbers of older dependents, which may lead to financial stress for social insurance systems, including expenditures on pensions and public health care. In coping with this, many countries of this kind have implemented reforms, such as a rise in the retirement age, designed to decelerate the rate of increase in social security costs. Yet one could question whether or not this unprecedented pace of ageing will have a significant negative effect on economic growth, since there has been 'no historical evidence of such an impact on the productivity or creativity of a society that is determined by the age structure of its population' [Folbre 2013]. Moreover, since the problem is rooted in a large number of different factors in society that have accumulated over a long period of time, the problem should be discussed from wider perspectives, involving the wholesale readjustment of societal systems and public policies for whole populations.

In order to identify possible solutions for the problems of an ageing society from an educational perspective, this early-stage study refers to the case of Japan in focusing upon the role of lifelong learning, not only in order to ensure a stable workforce by updating the skills of the potential workforce, but also to revitalize the whole of society. Illustrating the outline of ageing in this country by describing its causes and underlying factors based on analysis of papers and case studies, the paper intends to clarify the current features of Japanese lifelong learning. It also indicates what is required to shift the current emphasis in order to discover a way of turning longevity into a valuable potential asset.

The Overall Picture of Ageing in Japan

Japan has been experiencing an unprecedented demographic upheaval of rapid ageing, with a large number of senior citizens accounting for nearly a quarter of the total population, whilst witnessing extremely low rates of fertility (1.34, as of 2007) over the last few decades. In fact, in January 2012, according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, the senior population (aged 65 and over) is predicted to peak in 2042 at 38.78 million, and then drop to 34.64 million in 2060 [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012]. The rapid rate of ageing in this country is also conspicuous; it only took 24 years for Japan's 7% population ageing rate to double to 14% (the international benchmark for identifying an "aged society"), which is high compared with corresponding figures in most other industrial nations — 115 years in France, 85 in Sweden and 47 in Britain [Institute for International Cooperation & Japan International Cooperation Agency 2006]. Thus, this factor, combined with the lowest birth rates and the world's longest longevity rates (men: 79.64 years, women: 86.39 years in 2010), means that Japan is encountering situations unparalleled in world history.

Another serious issue is that the country's total population is expected to fall by almost a third within 50 years, from 128.06 million in 2010 to 86.74 million in 2060. By 2055, more than one in three Japanese people will be over 65, as the working-age population falls by over a third to 52 million [Tabuchi 2011], while the rate of natural mortality is expected to keep rising. This means that in 2025, three working people will have to support not only themselves but also two people who are outside the working population.

This rapid ageing can be explained by reference to different factors, such as the advancement of society, advances in medical technology, an increase in longevity, increased urbanization and diversification in lifestyles, advancements in education, the empowerment of women, an increase in educational costs and insufficient child-rearing allowances, generous benefits to the elderly and the lower benefits for children and families and, finally, the change to the labour policy in the 1990s, which led to an increase in short-term employment without any social security. As a result, a number of unexpected problems emerged, such as the escalation of public expenditures on health care and pensions, a shortage of nursing and personal care homes for older people in the near future (especially for those who live in Tokyo and its surrounding areas), an increase in traffic accidents involving older adults and an increase in trouble in various public spaces caused by older adults who have cognitive problems. On a more personal level, longer life spans may strain household finances, causing people to extend their working lives or rearrange family structures. Moreover, due to ageing and population shrinkage, rural communities in some parts of the country have already started to become deserted [Yoshida 2015].

At first sight, Japan's ageing population and its total shrinkage is often seen as an obstacle to innovation and economic competitiveness for the whole nation. However, there is space for discussion on whether or not this situation is a good chance to transform the old-fashioned norm that older people are unproductive, to a new idea that they are a great source of knowledge, experience, expertise and skills. According to Itsuki [Itsuki 2015], for instance, Japan could be prosperous again by leading a sort of "silver industry" in the world, one that could involve older adults and especially expand businesses that consider the various necessities of senior citizens. In other words, Japan will break new ground as a nation with a historically novel life expectancy and senior population by leading an expansion in "silver industries", such as medical and nursing care for seniors, and with companies producing very high-quality walkers, acoustic aids, aural aids, hearing aids and spectacles for presbyopia, etc. In addition, it can be expected that the national government and local administrations will set targets and implement new initiatives to help ensure that long lives can be lived in good health.

Characteristics of Japanese Lifelong Learning

Learning is important throughout one's life, not only to pursue one's inner interests and fulfil personal desires but also to contribute to society by enhancing our knowledge and skills. In most parts of the world, the latter benefit has been emphasized, and making use

of opportunities for lifelong learning in order to find better jobs and explore one's potential has been taken for granted. However, in Japanese society, the current provision of lifelong learning tends to be confined to pursuing one's hobbies or fulfilling one's interests, and most of the courses provided are leisure-oriented ones. Most elderly people tend to enjoy non-vocational subjects, while being reluctant to participate in vocational activities. In fact, post-war educational policies in Japan, especially since the 1960s, have largely tended to centre on general (non-vocational) subjects, while neglecting vocational ones in the curriculum [Hamaguchi 2013]. In other words, the content of education that people acquire has not seriously influenced the possibility of their finding jobs, and vocational content has tended to remain untouched during the post-war period. What have been most influential in this country are the names of the institutions from which one has graduated, rather than the content of the education that one has acquired, although this tendency has been gradually changing over the last decade. In addition, Japanese lifelong learning has not taken seriously the needs of those of working age (15–64). Meanwhile, the provision of short-term vocational programmes is organized by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and its related organizations. However, since its ultimate purpose is confined to people finding jobs, educational content is not considered from an educational perspective, and those who are engaged in teaching or training are not trained as educators to consider whole lives, but to connect the targets of their attention (those who are unemployed) to certain jobs. This results in short-termism, with people not having the adequate educational support they need to view their lives as a whole.

Moreover, as most organizations providing opportunities for lifelong learning have not introduced a fee-reduction system for those who are socially disadvantaged, participants tend to be wealthy and without any social, financial or physical problems. In consequence, most places for lifelong learning in Japan are filled with elderly people who have no serious health or financial problems, and a significant number of housewives who are not working and have time on their hands. For example, the Center for University Extension, which was created within Tokushima University (located in the south-western part of Japan) in 1986 as a hub of lifelong learning, has been set up to provide a variety of open courses to more than 2500 local residents. Its courses are all non-credit and largely leisure-oriented in nature, including languages (English, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese), choral singing, calligraphy, watching kabuki and opera videos, training for marathon races, health and fitness, yoga, dance, literature, history, international relations, etc. According to a survey conducted within the centre in 2008 [Suzuki 2014], in terms of the student age group, those aged between 50 and 90 account for nearly 80% of total participants. Among them, those who are in their 60s account for the largest proportion, followed by those in their 70s, and most students have retired from a stable job, without having any serious problems with their finances and/or health. On the other hand, those who are 30–49 account for about 18% of the student population, and most of them are housewives without jobs, while those aged 10–29 are scarce. Students' motivations for learning included (multiple answers were allowed, and the numbers in the brackets are the actual numbers of people who chose those options) : “extending hobbies” (249), “promoting well-being” (132), “fulfilling curiosities” (103), “enriching leisure time” (98), “making friends” (70), “enjoying a life at university” (35), “feeling connected to a community” (19), “obtaining qualifications” (8), “finding a job” (4) and “others” (17).

These characteristics can be seen not only in Tokushima but also in almost all parts of Japan. For example, a nationwide survey on lifelong learning conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2012 [Survey Unit of the Cabinet Office 2012] confirms this trend. The survey included 3000 respondents living all over Japan, and their main answers are described as follows (the numbers in the brackets are the percentages who chose those options per total respondents).

Place of learning (multiple answers allowed): non-formal public adult-education centres (40%), club activities (34%), private adult-education centres and sports clubs (30.6%), workplaces and/or organizations (27.5%), studying at home (27.4%).

Subjects of interests (multiple answers allowed): music, the arts, flower arrangement, dance, calligraphy, recreational activities (45.2%); the general arts, history, language, literature (27.3%); social issues, the environment, international affairs (19.5%); sports, health, nutrition, jogging, swimming (43.3%); skills for daily life (28.3%); knitting,

embroidery, cooking (13.4%); child-raising skills, educational issues (22.6%); vocational knowledge and ICT skills (13.9%); voluntary activities (15.3%); experiences in nature and camping (14.4%); formal learning at higher education institutions (4.7%) and no study at all (15%).

Conceptions of lifelong learning (multiple answers allowed): learning throughout one's life (46.2%); enjoying one's life and participating in activities that enrich one's heart (42.7%); leisure and interests (40.6%) and finding a new sense of purpose in life after retirement (34.7%).

Motivations for study (multiple answers allowed): enriching their lives (49.1%); maintaining health (43.9%); connecting to daily lives at home (36.7%); updating skills in a current vocation (31.3%) and volunteering in the local community and/or participating in sports or cultural activities (21.8%).

Willingness to make use of the contents of their learning for the benefit of society (either the labour market or in the local community): yes (43.3%), mostly yes (34.4%) and no (22.3%).

For those who did not participate in any formal or non-formal learning, the main reasons were: (multiple answers allowed): “too busy with work” (28.1%), “too busy with housework and raising children (11.2%), “too costly” (23.5%), “no place to study near one's house” (22.5%) and “no time to find information” (14.4%).

The outcomes above reaffirm what we know about the characteristics of Japanese lifelong learning in general, i.e., it is largely non-vocational, leisure-oriented, health-related and is awarded no credit. However, it is also clear that 77.7% of the respondents are willing to contribute to society by making use of what they have learned through lifelong learning programmes. In short, there is a clear gap between what is provided and what is required by the public. In order to alter this situation, appropriate support offered by both labour market policy and workplaces, such as the offer of a sort of ‘learning leave’, is essential. In addition, another issue lies in the non-existence of a nationwide standard to prove one's achievement in non-formal lifelong learning; therefore, it is not appealing for those who are of working age. To establish a third-party organization that plays a role in evaluating all kinds of courses provided across the nation is another challenge, one that requires appropriate guidance and/or consultation.

The Necessity of Changing the Contents of Lifelong Learning

As shown in the previous section, most of the institutions for lifelong learning in Japan are not currently taking vocational aspects seriously; they just focus on non-vocational, leisure subjects without subsidies. Most institutions are, in a way, filled with many older adult learners who have the potential to contribute to society, but who currently focus their learning outcomes on themselves. Therefore, it is high time to revitalize the generations whose potentials have been largely wasted, by exploring new roles for lifelong learning in the light of the current requirements of Japanese society; this is explored in more detail below.

Firstly, including more vocational aspects in content provision should be considered in two senses. One is to develop the potentials of elderly people by connecting opportunities for lifelong learning to work in some way or another, so that their knowledge, experience and skills can be given back to society. This could eventually lead to the extension of working lives for the elderly, and to the supplementation of the labouring population. The other reason is to provide more opportunities for working-age generations to update their knowledge and skills while they are working by providing more courses in the evenings and at weekends, which could also be beneficial for providers of lifelong learning in promoting intergenerational learning. This is useful because a lifetime's employment and the system of ‘on-the-job training’ provided by employers, which had been general in most companies since the Second World War, can no longer be guaranteed, and more and more people wish to develop their knowledge and skills during their working age. Additionally, a nationwide accreditation system should be introduced to evaluate learning outcomes of individual learners, and should be conducted by a third party to ensure its objectivity. The necessity of this reform is reaffirmed by the statistics of the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) in 2010, which revealed the fact that approximately 60% of the total population wished to

work after they reached 65 for financial reasons [Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2010]. Needless to say, this kind of reform would be successful if it was supported by amending the national labour policies, as well as raising the awareness of individual employers on the importance of lifelong learning during one's working life.

Secondly, Japanese lifelong learning should include those who are socially disadvantaged or isolated from society, by introducing an appropriate subsidy system. One of the difficulties of a "super-aged society" is that the issues of ageing cannot be easily solved by just intensifying vocational aspects, as older generations have many different elements in their lives, and the problem must be treated as one with multidimensional aspects. At present, most participants are confined to those who have no serious problems with their health or finances. As a result, learning providers are not evenly prepared for people who have different backgrounds. For example, how to tackle the issue of dementia is one challenge, and in fact, a quarter of the elderly has been reported as having developed dementia or mild cognitive impairment (MCI). Therefore, each of the organizations should consider more seriously how to treat such people with dignity and respect so that they can lead independent lives as far as possible. It is reported worldwide that lifelong learning has the potential to develop the unexplored possibilities of human beings, whilst reducing the risks of early dementia or MCI if accompanied by proper treatment. For instance, participating in certain learning opportunities could produce positive effects, not only in their symptoms but also in many practical aspects of their daily lives. In order to promote this trend more effectively, proper guidance and training for those who are working with the elderly should be provided, and the process of learning throughout one's life should be monitored more carefully, together with improvements to the infrastructures of the institutions.

Thirdly, the system of training specialists who can effectively coordinate the process of learning for individual learners should be considered more deliberately. Although there are some relevant qualifications issued by the central government and an incorporated foundation, their purposes are not clearly defined, and those that are do not match the reality of the current "super-aged society". However, while they supply missing aspects in Japanese lifelong learning, the specialists must also grasp the needs of individuals in terms of their whole lives and with a long-term perspective. New insights, such as the typical features of older adults and their learning needs, appropriate measures to treat people of various backgrounds, more effective methods to inform people of all generations of the latest knowledge would be required in order to reorganize the whole Japanese system of lifelong learning. Likewise, the project should include various stakeholders in each of the local communities, experts in various fields and volunteers who have retired from their jobs in order to explore their potential.

Concluding Remarks

The world's population is gradually transforming into an ageing one, although the situation differs greatly depending on the continent and the country. Japan has already reached the state of being a "super-aged society", with more than 20% of its population being those who are 65 and over. Its speed of ageing is the fastest in the world, together with the rate of population shrinkage. Japanese society has been experiencing a rate of ageing unprecedented in world history, but the nation has not been prepared well for this daunting task. In terms of the dynamics of economic power, the subject tends to be discussed from a pessimistic viewpoint. However, it could be said that Japan has the potential to break new ground as a nation with a never-before-experienced life expectancy and a large senior population by, for example, exploring innovative ideas of "silver industries", which could result in prosperous advanced health and well-being in old age by exploiting older adults' knowledge, experience and skills. Older persons' abilities to act for the betterment of themselves and their societies should be woven more deeply into policies and programmes at all levels, so that they can continue to contribute to society in various ways.

The trends in Japanese lifelong learning have long been confined to its non-vocational, leisure aspects, while neglecting both the vocational aspects of those who are of working age and the needs of those who are socially disadvantaged. Therefore, it is high time to alter this situation by appropriate measures, as follows. First, lifelong learning should include more vocational elements in programmes in order to bring out the potential of elderly people and make use of their knowledge, experience and skills for the benefit of society, as well as to help younger generations who wish to update their knowledge and skills for their future careers. Second, it should consider creating an appropriate system to include more people of various backgrounds by, for example, introducing a flexible subsidy system. Third, it should create a training system for specialists in this field with more deliberate consideration, in the light of society's urgent requirements. In order to work towards these goals, it is necessary to remove any obstacles that prevent their achievement.

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