

The Declining Population and Its Implications for Language Education in Japan

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Abstract

The declining population of Japan has been studied, analyzed and debated among academics, economists and politicians regarding its effect on the economy and society. Its impact on education however has been less thoroughly investigated. In English language research in particular, there has not been enough attention paid to this important phenomenon.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the declining population's effect on language education throughout Japan and suggest possible solutions to counter its negative influences. Is Japan's demographic change something we as language instructors, lecturers and professors need to fear? It is the aim of this paper to find out.

Introduction

The fact that Japan's population is declining is not in dispute. The phenomenon of falling birth rates has taken place not only in Japan but has also occurred in developed nations such as the United States of America (U.S.) and members of the European Union (EU). Family planning advocates, economists, social scientists and environmental policy analysts have uniformly observed that *higher education, especially for women, leads to lower birth rates* (Chaudhury, 1996). While there are many advantageous aspects to smaller populations, especially considering environmental aspects and quality of life for the citizens of these nations, the declining population issue does raise some concern. With respect to the U.S., a

declining population exists in that the native population is having fewer and fewer children, much like Japan. However, the U.S. has a relatively liberal immigration policy (not to mention millions of undocumented immigrants) which allows for population growth, but this is where the similarity ends (Population Profile of the U.S. - U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Japan with its strict immigration policies does not allow for the settlement of immigrants on anything approaching this scale. The simple fact is that without large scale immigration the population of Japan will continue to decline in the actual numbers of citizens.

This paper aims to examine some of the effects that Japan's declining population has on education, in particular language education programs in higher education.

Background

Japan is ageing rapidly. In 2025, one third of the population will be sixty-five or older and almost 5 percent of the population will be over 85 years of age (Kingston, 2004). By 2055, there will be approximately 38 million fewer people living in Japan than there are today barring any unforeseen drastic changes in immigration policy (United Press International, 2006). In 2009, the total number of children under the age of 15 declined for the 28th year in a row. Japan currently ranks lowest in percentage of children among the general population among 31 countries with a population of 30 million or more (Kyodo news, 2009).

A recent article in the Daily Yomiuri highlighting the declining population in Japan and its economic impact examines Japan's population in relation to other countries. The workforce of the future in its ability to provide revenue for the nation's health care and social benefits is very much in doubt.

“The latest U.N. median forecast estimates Japan’s population will fall from the current 127 million to just 101.6 million by 2050, while the U.S. count will rise from 317 million to 404 million. Even worse, Tokyo itself predicts, the number of Japanese of prime working age (15-64) which totaled 83 million in 2007, is likely to tumble to 49 million in 2050...That would mean more than 77 elderly dependents for every 100 workers by 2050, compared with just 33 per 100 now.”(Laird, 2009 Daily Yomiuri)

Clearly, the declining population is a concern for policy-makers across Japan. Some might argue that this constitutes a serious crisis facing Japan. The focus of this paper will be to examine the effect of the falling birthrate on higher education and language programs in Japanese universities. It is essential however, to point out the magnitude of the issue and that its effect is felt on all levels of society. A useful definition of an ageing society encompasses three central factors:

“The major trends of population ageing are the following:

- 1) People are living longer;
- 2) They are getting married later;
- 3) They have fewer children.”(Columas, 2007: pg 25)

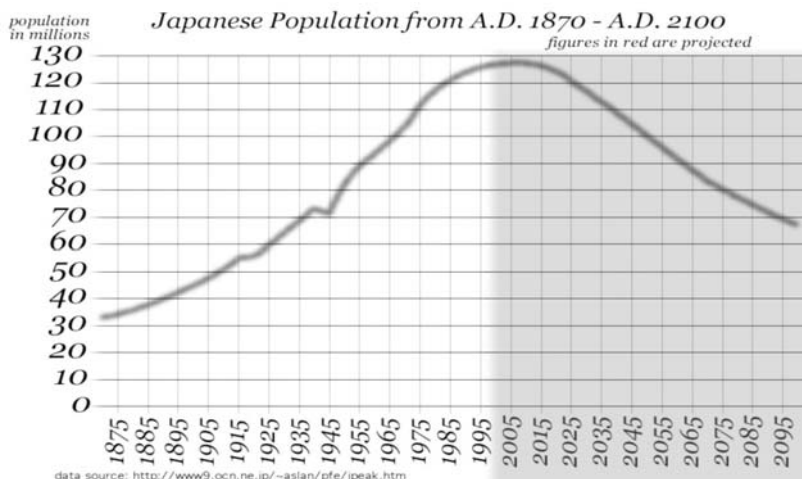
In the global context, Japan is not alone in these trends, but without the massive influx of immigrants it does place at the top of the list in terms of the severity of the population decline. Concern about this problem among Japanese citizens is widespread and polls have put those who view this problem with great concern at over 70 percent (Coulmas, 2007). The statistics point to a dramatically altered

Japan of the future, one where all aspects of society have been transformed.

“...the consequences of population are so ubiquitous that virtually no social domain, no institution and no individual remains unaffected...Should the low statistical birth rate of 1.25 children born to a woman in her lifetime calculated in 2006 continue unchanged, the last Japanese will be born 953 years from now. Though few expect to live to verify it, many in Japan find such a prediction disquieting.”(Coulmas, 2007: 2)

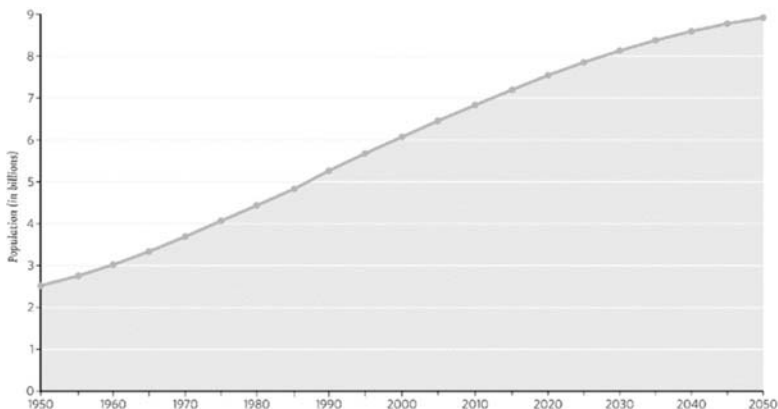
Figure A below represents Japan’s current population and future growth projections. These figures and trends contrast sharply with world population growth as shown in Figure B.

Figure A Japan’s Population Growth



(CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>)

Figure B World Population Growth
Global Population Growth – Source, UNFPA State of the World, United Nations



(Population Fund Website: <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2004/english/ch1/page7.htm#1>)

The declining population is a concern to many citizens in Japan, although it is hard to fathom the exact effect that this decline will have on society. Columas (2207) suggests that the declining population phenomena will create change in all spheres of society including:

- the socioeconomic system;
- economic cycles;
- labour force participation rates;
- work organization;
- the welfare state;
- gender relations;

- education;
- lifestyle and consumption patterns;
- intergenerational transfer and living arrangements;
- technology;
- values, preferences and fashions. (Columas, 2007; pg 128)

As Japan grapples with the issue a potential, solution becomes apparent: allow more foreign people into the country. A very tentative attempt at this is already taking place. The hiring of nursing home caregivers who are serving in Japan's ailing health care system from countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam and the hiring of 'trainees' for rural, agricultural work are some clear examples (Columas, 2007). It is also interesting to note that in the rural areas of Japan the population decline can be seen first hand in a more dramatic fashion than in the urban centers. Not only are fewer children being born throughout Japan but the majority of young people from rural areas are moving away in droves. This leaves economically depressed rural communities with few young people and overburdened social services. Many of these towns and neighborhoods may soon cease to exist as viable communities (Kerr, 2001). Increased immigration by skilled migrants may spell some relief for these communities.

The Declining Population's Impact on Education

How does the declining population affect education? As mentioned above, this phenomenon will affect almost every aspect of Japan's economy, culture, government and society and education will be no exception.

The numbers of students are declining throughout Japan. Language programs

in Japan as well as the lecturers, professors, instructors and part-time language teachers working in these programs will also be affected by the decline in population. Indeed, this is already taking place.

As Gregory S. Poole (2005) states, the simple economics of too few students and too many programs and universities are cause for alarm and will result in a weakening of university programs and departments.

“For Universities the severe drop in the number of young adults has had serious consequences. Whereas up until only ten years ago the numbers of applicants produced a literal glut in the HE [higher education] market...by 2009 at the latest the places available at HEIs will most likely equal the number of applicants.” (Poole, 2005)

Poole continues by stating that as far back as 2000 the enrollment shortfall at four year universities due to the fewer applicants was as high as 33 percent with those of *senmongakos* (two year colleges somewhat similar to community colleges in the U.S.) reaching as high as 50 percent. This fact, adding pressure on the need for reform of all of higher education in Japan has forced Japanese universities to seriously reconsider their curricula and policies. (Poole, 2005)

It is clear that the declining population on language teaching at the university level and also on education in general is having a significant, and arguably negative, impact on curricula, programs, departments and institutions. Several key factors need to be considered:

1. Japan's population is in fact declining. This phenomenon, already evident in its early stages, will lead to decreased enrollments as fewer and fewer numbers enter the university system.
2. Increased competition among universities to enroll the shrinking pool of students is ensuing.
3. The process of allowing students previously considered ineligible to enter universities will accelerate. Seats in university classrooms need to be filled due to financial, departmental and possible vested political interest has caused or may cause many universities in Japan to lower entrance admission standards.

Within the field of language research these issues and indeed others created by the declining population will have many ramifications and political considerations.

The phenomenon of the declining birthrate is leading to a market in higher education that virtually assures any student in Japan a place at the table. The former, rigorous standards of Japanese entrance examinations and qualifications are fast fading, especially at lower and mid-level universities.

“According to the projections made by the MOE (Ministry of Education) by 2009 the number of undergraduate places in colleges and universities will equal the number of would-be students. Anyone wanting to go to college will be assured of a place...In this scenario, a relatively small fraction of all would-be college students will continue seriously studying for entrance to a small group of prestigious colleges and universities. A much larger body of students will

study the relative attractiveness of competing admission offers from a large number of colleges and universities desperate to fill places and generate enough tuition revenue to avoid bankruptcy.” (Kinmoth, 2005; pg 106)

As suggested, the elite top universities standards may well remain high, but for more mid and lower tier universities, the standards of education will inevitably slide as the competition to enter them disappears. In fact, it is now the universities that must compete for students rather than the other way around. Japan’s stereotypical high-school student, working day and night to enter university is becoming, for a sizable segment of the population, a thing of the past. While the stereotype of the Japanese high-school student is changing, the Japanese university is also undergoing dramatic change. In this new climate, universities through ‘branding,’ open campus events, gimmicks and advertising aim to attract the student as a valuable commodity to their institution. The future of many universities in Japan relies on this simple law of supply and demand. The student in some ways is now king.

Political considerations of this new reality in Japanese education are many. An obvious concern might be the transparency of institutions in disclosing their application procedures and downplaying the poor academic level of their students for fear of weakening their standing and attracting future high-level students (McVeigh, 2002). This means that on the part of the institution much of the data we have to work with is less than precise. We can therefore look at overall trends and make predictions based on the knowledge and data available without knowing precisely what will occur in the future. While the measurements may not be exact the trend is unmistakable: fewer students mean more competition by the

universities and senmongako to attract them. This may allow university standards to suffer and may have already affected the quality of applicants enrolling in higher-education institutions throughout the Japan (Eades, 2005; McVeigh, 2002).

Demographic Change and the Future of Higher Education in Japan

We have briefly examined some of the negative aspects of a declining population. Might there be any positive aspects to this phenomenon? Several factors can be seen as contributing to an increased quality of life of citizens in nations such as Japan that have low birthrates. These factors relate to environmental quality as well as personal freedoms and choice of the individual in societies with declining populations. Might there be a possibility for improvements regarding future language programs, as well as for Japanese higher education in general?

As the population declines and universities and departments shrink, these institutions become financially unsustainable without generous governmental subsidies. For lack of a better term, 'popular' and top-tier universities might well retain their programs while those with fewer and fewer enrollments could possibly close; first the departments and then entire universities. The scenario is unwelcome, especially for those students who lose the recognition or status of their university as it fades from existence. For lecturers, professors, researchers, administrators and logistical staff also, it will mean a loss of income and respect. Regardless, the old model can not be sustained indefinitely. This means fewer institutions as well as academic positions available. However there is no reason to believe that these institutions could not improve academically. Much like a shrinking automotive market means fewer brands to choose from, it does not necessarily mean the quality of those brands go down. In fact, while the choices

are fewer, the quality overall may actually increase as weaker products (in our case, programs and universities) are taken off the marketplace.

Many in academia may dislike this comparison but it is in fact the reality that the number of positions for language teachers and programs for students will fall in the future without drastic state intervention. While the demographic decline is real and measurable, what political solutions or gimmicks will be deployed is not known. As Columas (2007) demonstrates, there is no area of personal, institutional or societal life of Japan that will be untouched by the phenomenon of the declining population. With a strain on welfare services, the Japanese government may be placed in a position to no longer offer such generous assistance to Japanese universities and *senmongako* as it has in the past. If we imagine a situation where there is less public money available, competition may actually increase and lead to a rise in academic standards. A rise in standards at Japanese higher education institutions may be the prescription for increased international student enrollments and international recognition and prestige, qualities that may have been lacking in many Japanese universities (McVeigh, 2002).

Education is not merely a science but also an art in which culture plays an important role. Many rankings and standards measuring the value of Japanese higher education do not necessarily do it justice and might be labeled as culturally relativist. It is not the aim of this paper to criticize Japanese higher education generally but what makes these analyses important is not merely whether they are factually accurate but that they represent a very real and important perception. Japanese higher education is viewed with suspect from abroad. Its value does not stand squarely with those of other leading industrialized nations' institutions, a

symbolic of which be seen in the awarding of Nobel prizes.

“Internationally, Japan’s higher education is often criticized, and much made of the fact that Japan has so far [as of 2002] only produced six Nobel laureates in natural sciences (the United States has produced 179; Britain 67; Germany 61; France 21; and Switzerland 14).” (McVeigh 2002, Pg 5)

This negative publicity and lack of recognition affects not only the desirability of Japan’s educational institutions by students from abroad but also the credibility of the graduates who wish to compete on an ever-specialized and competitive global marketplace. With this in mind, Japan’s universities, particularly those higher-ranked, must do more than simply create workers for Japan’s specialized economy and society. These academic institutions must find innovative ways to provide talent for their own labor pools but the larger, global world as well. In short, Japan must integrate with higher education elsewhere, focusing less on culture and ‘behavior’ as McVeigh writes, but on skills and capacity building.

The need to improve university curricula overall will bring about dramatic cultural challenges at Japanese universities. Numerous researchers (McVeigh, 1997; 2002; 2007, Kerr, 2001, and Kinmoth, 2005) suggest that the Japanese university is unlike any other university system. In fact, McVeigh famously quotes a university president who defends students not doing homework and merely having fun as a natural and evolutionary part of life in Japan before the real world sets in and long working hours become the norm (McVeigh, 2002). These attitudes and norms have impeded Japanese education and have created a culture that may be accept-

able in Japan but have been viewed with occasional disdain internationally. This cultural reality means Japan's language programs face Japan-specific factors that hinder them in the international marketplace for ideas. More concretely, these institutions are hurt by low international student enrollment numbers and tuition fees that might help sustain them under other circumstances.

In comparing Japan's educational system with institutions abroad it is worth examining briefly the scientific branch of Japan's higher education institutions. Indeed, Japan's role in the international scientific community seems to be more highly regarded with greater respect than its contribution to the humanities. However, here too the prevailing culture of Japan's higher education is to the detriment of its international standing.

“Dr. Shirakawa (A Japanese scientist) is diplomatic in raising the question of culture in evaluating why Japan, immensely rich with more than a century of universal education and the world's second largest economy, performs more like a modestly endowed middle-ranking country. Others in the scientific community are more scathing in their self-appraisal...The problems they cite include excessive government control over both research funding and education, faculties still steeped in Confucian ideals of age grade promotion and piety toward seniors, and a generalized penchant for seeking incremental advancement of knowledge at the expense of bold experimentation.” (French, 2001)

Scientific research being carried out in Japanese universities is not the only area where culture affects the standing of Japanese higher education research. (Kerr,

2001) It can be argued that the Japanese educational system works well for the Japanese themselves. Additionally, one may argue that it is up to the Japanese themselves to determine their values and purposes for education. Japan is a nation with an extremely high literacy rate, very low poverty and adequate social services overall. But, as argued by many of the sources quoted throughout this paper, in the international arena Japan's educational system suffers in comparisons with other industrialized nations. One measure of this is in the number of foreign students currently studying at Japanese universities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs states:

“As of May 1, 2008, the number of international students studying in Japan reached a record 123,829. Looking at the students' countries of origin, about 92% are from the neighboring countries and regions of Asia (of which the top three shares are China at about 58.8%, Korea at about 15.2%, and Taiwan at about 4.1%).” (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 2008)

This number represents the peak of international students in Japan, a goal long strived for by the Japanese government. Yet when we look at totals for the nations within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the year 2006, this figure represents less than 7 % of the total 2,440, 657 of all foreign students enrolled at a university. (OECD AT A GLANCE, 2008)

If we contrast Japan with one of its fellow OECD countries we see a glaring discrepancy in numbers of international students studying at national higher education institutions. In 2006 the United Kingdom (UK), with a total population of just under 60 million people, which is less than half that of Japan's total population of approximately 127 million, had 330,078 international students. Japan

had only 130,124 international students (United Kingdom Governmental Statistics, 2009). Simply put, the United Kingdom with slightly less than half of Japan's population has almost three times the number of international students. If we adjust these figures per capita, roughly five times the number of international students study in the UK as compared with Japan.

If foreign students are to be a large part of Japan's higher education solution, then reforms that bring Japan's institutions in line with the rest of the industrialized world are surely needed. In order to attract many foreign students to Japanese universities, a great deal of change will need to take place regarding curricula, structures and incentives of these academic institutions.

The Japanese government has begun to address this issue. In 2000 the Justice Ministry addressed the problem stated above in its report, 'Basic Plan for Immigration Control.' In addition, the government stated in a Prime Ministerial Commission paper that there should be provisions that would increase the number of foreign students who, after completing their studies in Japanese universities, would become immigrant workers. These workers in turn would further Japan's economic power and future stability. The Prime Ministerial Commission states:

“First of all we should set up a more explicit immigration and permanent residence system so as to encourage foreigners who can be expected to contribute to the development of Japanese society... We should also consider preferential treatment for foreigners who study or conduct research in Japan – such as allowing them automatically to acquire permanent residence status when they complete their academic work at a Japanese high school, university, or graduate school.” (Chapple, 2005)

If the Commission's recommendations took place on a large scale Japan's managed globalization and the internationalization of higher education might ironically equate relief for Japan's famously homogenous society as education might act as a bridge to bring workers in and increase its social security and pension solvency. While the internationalization of higher education in Japan might appear to be a commonsense answer to many of its troubles, there are still ossified forces very much opposed to any change and to rendering the status quo obsolete. The process of integrating Japan's universities globally is by no means a decided issue, with many stakeholders actually opposed to both the international standardization process and increases in foreign students (McVeigh, 2006).

As the Japanese government debates what the future will bring and which policies are best to implement, many argue that immigration will play a huge role in both the economy and society in the future. Higher education in Japan, despite some strong internal opposition, will have to internationalize and standardize curricula in order to attract quality students to language programs as well as all other fields if the Japanese universities are to flourish. Japanese universities must reform and change fundamentally in order to avoid their current status as places that 'keep individuals occupied and entertained until they join the labor force' (McVeigh, 2002). This would provide real value to students and give them internationally recognized expertise in fields such as language rather than feel-good and enjoyable experiences in university with little academic merit.

Reform, in fact, is taking place. On the first of April, 2004 Ministry of Education reforms that aimed at completely overhauling the Japanese higher education system went into effect. Through his research (Eades, 2005) states that these reforms

are the most significant in the past 100 years. The reforms intend to privatize national universities, make universities more competitive and streamlined. The goal has also been to ‘marketize’ institutions, making them more competitive and less reliant on cumbersome governmental bureaucracies. As discussed in this paper, the ‘marketizing’ of Japanese universities is well under way as institutions must compete for ever-shrinking student enrollments. In addition, these institutions must be made more transparent in their budgeting and allocation of resources as well as the soundness of their curricula and management of programs (Eades, 2005). The impact these reforms will have on the future and how governmental changes, such as the recent, historic election placing the Democratic Party of Japan at the helm, will bring for the future remains to be researched and analyzed.

It may be useful to briefly examine the 2004 reforms and the ‘marketizing’ of higher education in relation to language programs and some of this reform process is discussed in the next section of this paper.

An Examination of the Declining Population and its Affect at Kanda University of International Studies

For a better understanding of the problems outlined in this paper, the author conducted an interview with a professor in the English faculty at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). This interview, while anecdotal, captures a professor’s point of view regarding the declining population and the pressures resultant on higher education at KUIS in Chiba.¹

¹ The professor wishes to remain anonymous, with the encouragement of the author, in order to speak freely on this issue. His opinions do not necessarily reflect that of other professors at Kanda University or the management of the institution.

In regards to admissions and specifically, the pressures not only felt at KUIS but across the country, the professor stated the easing of the process of entrance exams was becoming apparent. The institution felt the pressure of the declining number of students to make changes in the way students entered KUIS. “From this year...the entrance exam., especially the recommendation exam has changed the examination [process] drastically. There are several ways to get in to this university.” The traditional application policies, recommended schools, grade point averages and other ways that students traditionally entered university in Japan have changed over time. He says, “Kanda’s applicants have declined over past several years... So in order to maintain the number of applicants they needed the examination which looks like it is easy to get in. So they abolished the old application...The PR [public relations] department is working very hard, doing open campus programs...” The Professor went on to state that despite the need to marketize the institution, the University was doing a good job at educating its students overall, but like other institutions, faced pressures in simply keeping enrollments high.

“From my own point of view, we are doing a really good job in educating, and because of that we have a good reputation.” However, the Professor stated the need to fill seats has led to more lower-level students being accepted than in the past, which has been an increasing reality for many other universities as well. “It seems to me that we have more students who are not ready for college level education...I think that is happening in many universities... Up until quite recently the MOE² was

² Ministry of Education

issuing approval for creating new universities or new departments. I think the intention behind that was that the ministry wanted us to compete [with] each other. Because of that many universities in Japan and struggling with the issue of students ...the students are childish and the manner during the class is worse [than before].”³

Trying to attract ‘weaker’ students to universities, despite their low academic standing or attitude, has become a reality in Japan today. While this may be true of middle and lower-tier universities, is this also occurring in more highly respected institutions? The Professor mentioned that even “top schools” nowadays are spending more money on advertising. This is a new phenomenon. In the past, the university’s reputation alone would attract high-caliber students to their universities. The declining population has changed all this. The Professor stated that in the past five years “top schools” have started holding open campuses where in the past there was no need for such a marketing strategy. This has been a response to the increasing competition to attract students and increase enrollment. It appears that the students are controlling the market and the universities must attract them, not the other way around. “Technically speaking, now, the number of seats are more than the number of applicants. So if they do not care where they go they can

³ In fact the number of Universities did increase dramatically without taking into consideration the declining population and its impact on University admissions. “... during the period 1992-2004, the number of four-year universities actually increased by an even faster rate than the decrease in the eighteen-year-old population. In 1992 there were 98 national, 41 public and 384 private four-year universities in Japan; in April 2004, there were 88 national, 77 public and 545 private four-year institutions, an overall increase of 31.9 percent.” EADES, *The Big Bang in Higher Education* pg 5 (Italics mine)

literally get into any kind of university.”

The Professor reiterated the importance of brands. The importance of the ‘branding’ of a university has become more and more important across Japan. These universities, however, may not be focusing on the quality of the education or on their curricula but rather on making universities interesting and exciting. Making their ‘brand’ is what counts. However, there is a danger in this. “The management of education may be more important than the maintenance of education. The reason they do that is to keep the university [solvent] but if we continue picking up those students who are not ready for college-level education then we can not do what we are supposed to do in our classes.”

The Professor summed up the worries of other colleagues in the field in relation to the competing interests of making private universities ‘profitable’ and providing quality education through rigorous standards. “The industrialization of university [education] is a really dangerous idea...,” he concludes.

Recommendations and Possible Future Solutions

At the risk of being somewhat unorthodox, it is possible, after briefly examining the problems in higher education as related to Japan’s declining population, to propose some suggestions or recommendations based on a probable future scenario. This scenario might involve some or all of the following:

1. a general trend of fewer Japanese students annually
2. an increase in competition by institutions to enroll the shrinking student

population

3. a decrease in competition by students to enter the majority of Japanese universities
4. a likely lowering of standards to keep both universities and departments solvent

If the future projections as highlighted in this paper are correct, then there is an almost drastic need to reform the Japanese university. Language programs that cater only to mid-level students will face increased competition; the more attractive the package offered to students through public relations events, the more likely to win over more potential students. Other universities will likely fail without massive subsidies where student interest is flagging. The schools that remain have several choices in how to proceed. If fulfilling the cultural need of education as a leisure activity is adequate and students, and their parents, are satisfied with this form of education, then the status quo may be maintained but only by increasing the perks of attending the university, perhaps in the form of more attractive facilities, club activities and events and so on. This indeed has been something that has been occurring for some time. This option, however, will not suffice for the aggregate international standards that the OECD nations demand of four-year academic universities and language programs outside of Japan. Once again we see the cultural dilemma posed by Japan's unique brand of higher education as it has been practiced in the post-war years.

This brings us to another choice. Through effective reform, Japanese institutions and language programs can compete for the lucrative and dynamic 'international market' of foreign students. In order to increase the numbers of foreign

students the Japanese university must internationalize (and not in name only, as has been the pattern.) Buzzwords are a way of making institutions and individuals feel good about their work but they are largely meaningless, much like many advertising slogans that say nothing in effect about the true quality of a given product. The policy, staffing and curricula of the educational institution are what really matters in the end. As (McVeigh, 1997) states, the usage of the term 'international' is much in vogue in Japan and has been for some time but as these slogans are merely that – slogans, popular labels with little substance attached. The actual internationalization or merging with more international standards of education remains for many universities in Japan a far off goal, or one that might be feared and rejected. The roles of education in different societies differ based on what values are placed on it. Is education in Japan merely to provide for a Japanese-only model that molds students into obedient and acquiescing future office ladies and salarymen? Or is it to provide a deeper, perhaps more elusive goal of educating the young to be free and critical thinking, well-adjusted young scholars who become Japan's future innovators?

If Japanese universities agree to the 'international model,' how might the 'Japanese model's policies and curricula change? By studying models that work overseas and at institutions that have been innovative in Japan, universities can begin attracting international students to study not only Japanese but also English when we speak of language programs and a host of information-technology and bio-technology programs outside of language programs by attracting the large pool of growing, highly-academic students from China as well as other nations.

Foreign students will bring in new culture and vitality to Japan's universities as they are arguably more in tune to international norms and standards. These

overseas students will provide a financial lifeline to the universities that are capable of providing internationally respected curricula. Japan's universities must compete with the rest of the world for motivated students in order to improve its educational programs.

A third choice is to allow well-liked and popular programs and departments within a university to continue and simply allow weaker programs or departments to fold. The possibility of failure can be extended to universities as a whole. This is indeed occurring already, and with current population projections will likely continue to do so. A smaller pool of students will mean a smaller pool of universities to choose from and therefore a less drastic weakening of standards. The current status quo that allows any student with an even remote interest in higher education being guaranteed a seat at a four-year university will realistically mean a continuation of the lowering of standards. This may not be a real education but a four year 'summer camp' environment. For the prestige of Japan's educational system, already in dire trouble as highlighted throughout this paper, the lowering of standards and guaranteed admission for poor-performing students is not a path towards legitimacy in international education.

Conclusions

It has been the purpose of this paper to draw attention in a broad and very general manner to the problem regarding Japan's declining population and language programs in higher education. As discussed, the issues and complex problems posed will affect all levels of society, and higher education is certainly no exception. The smaller number of students competing for more and more 'seats' at universities throughout Japan will pose serious problems in the maintenance of

educational standards. Today, universities feel more and more pressure to attract students to 'fun' and 'exciting' university experiences where sound curricula easily take a back seat to the 'branding' of universities and the enjoyment quotient of university life. Japan's educational leaders and policy makers must look at ways of retaining educational standards and indeed, increasing these standards in order to attract first-rate students from abroad. While there are no easy fixes, an influx of high-level students from overseas may be one of the tools that may be used to improve the level of education and financial health of higher education in Japan. Quality language programs offered at higher education institutions could provide a service to students and financial health to their institutions by attracting foreign students. Much depends on the leadership and decision-makers who must ask themselves, are language education programs meant simply to be enjoyable or first-rate? Japan's competitiveness in the arena of international education is at stake.

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