Proceedings of International Conference on Islamic Education (ICIED)
Impactful Education: Integrating Technology, and Ecotheological Values For a Sustainable Future
Volume 10, 2025 (p-ISSN 2477-3638 / e-ISSN 2613-9804)

Sustainability and educational practice: a perspective from Japan

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Abstract
This paper considers issues of sustainability in Japanese tertiary education from two viewpoints, namely whether the current high number of institutions relative to the declining youth population is likely to remain unchanged, and how Japanese universities do or do not engage in educational efforts to teach and research sustainability as a field. As such, the paper brings together two meanings of sustainability – that is, the sense of continuation, and that of furnishing a means of support – and then shows how, in the Japanese case, they are somewhat related due to historical, cultural, and religious reasons. With regard to the question of all current universities remaining open into the future, the available data is not particularly positive, and this may be especially true for privately-run institutions founded with religious principles at heart. As for teaching and researching sustainability, the picture is rather better, especially at public universities or at private universities willing to form partnerships with external organizations with relevant expertise. The paper concludes by describing a modestly successful program that might act as an exemplar for institutions seeking to create new sustainability-related programs for their own students. The Global Leadership Program collaborates with the local UN-Habitat Office, and sends its students to various domestic and international locations to work on sustainability issues.

Keywords:
Sustainability; Tertiary Education; Japan

A. INTRODUCTION

Children in Japan attend school from age 6 to 15 at a minimum; in fact, 99% of students continue on to high school (OECD, 2018) and in general, the standard up to secondary level is higher than many other countries. Furthermore, in April 2025 high school became free for public school students, and from April 2026, it will also be free for students attending private schools (Japan Center for Economic Research [JCER], n.d.)

Japanese university education, however, has regularly been noted for its relative laxity compared to the examinations high school students sit in order to gain a place at one of the higher ranked tertiary institutions (Christopher, 1983; McVeigh, 2002, Fryer et al., 2014). McVeigh cites an interview in which a university president describes his own lack of study (McVeigh, 2002, p.11), and the automatic graduation of students, regardless of performance (p. 72). It should be noted that this less about an unwillingness to work hard, and more of a pause in which to reflect and recharge one's energies before starting to work full-time. As Christopher notes, students have already demonstrated their ability to work hard, and – until relatively recently – companies were more interested in having a generalized, flexible source of labour than particular grades or majors (Christopher, 1983, p. 93).

Growth in the economy and a rise in credentialism led to a major increase in the number of universities and students attending. 160,000 more students entered university in 1996 than in 1986 (McVeigh, 2002). But now the population is decreasing rapidly, and the economy has been poor for years. This means that companies now often want students who have done something

academic during their university days, and that universities themselves are under severe pressure to find enough students. Compounding this issue is the government's laissez-faire approach to university numbers, and in fact, more new universities are opening, despite the decline in the college-age population. Since the 1990s peak, the number of 18-year-olds has dropped by over 40% (Goodman & Oka, 2018), and yet over 100 new universities have been permitted to open in the past 20 years (MEXT, n.d.). Fujiwara, (2005) reports that universities founded on religious principles may be at particular risk of losing ground to other tertiary institutions with less particular identities.

This, clearly, is not a situation that can continue for ever. However, there are historical and cultural reasons explaining why such a situation has arisen, and the study will investigate some of the most relevant ones.

As such, then, the study has the following objectives: first, to explicate demographic and institutional data from Japan; second, to highlight the nature of the aforementioned institutions to a new audience; third, to draw together the idea of sustainability as it relates to these institutions' long-term future and teaching sustainability as an academic topic; and finally to introduce one example of a program that may be of interest to the reader.

B. METHOD

Initial database searches were carried out on campus using the university's facilities, including its library. Both English and Japanese databases were included in the search. A follow-up search looking at grant approvals from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, n.d.) was then conducted to collate data on financial support for sustainability-related research projects.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to sustainability in terms of offering support, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's homepage dedicated to summarizing disbursements of research funding show that between 2020 and 2025 the Japanese government funded 11,600 projects relating to sustainability. Precise figures on the amounts disbursed cannot be calculated, but the data do show that 30 projects received over 500,000,000 yen each. A further 294 projects received between 100,000,000 yen and 500,000,000 yen (National Institute of Informatics, n.d.). As such, it can be said that Japan is not unserious about funding sustainability research.

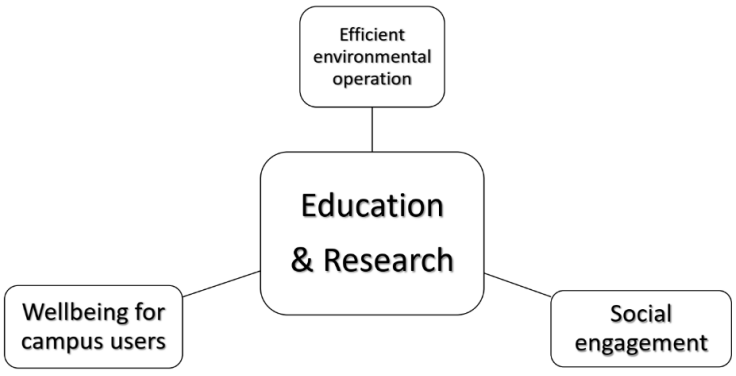

Figure 1: Simplified Adaption of Campus Sustainability

Focusing on Japanese campuses, Ikegami and Neuts (2000), defined campus sustainability as being "comprised of four dimensions: environmentally efficient operations; sufficient wellbeing for internal and external campus users; education and research on sustainability; and social engagement toward a sustainable society" (Ikegami & Neuts, 2020, p.13). A simplified model of their illustrated definition is given in Figure 1. Their data were derived from a cluster analysis of 42 programs offered at Japanese universities. The clusters yielded four types of institution, those succeeding across all four dimensions (which they termed "top-of-the-class"), those doing poorly with all four ("lagging-behind"), and then two more subtle distinctions "asset-driven", meaning those successfully managing their assets towards a sustainable direction, and finally "networkers", which describes universities connecting with external resources effectively. Interestingly, although size helps campuses to perform well, smaller universities were able to reach top-of-the-class status through intentional strategizing, and even the smallest programs can be effective networkers or asset managers (Ikegami & Neuts, 2020, p.12).

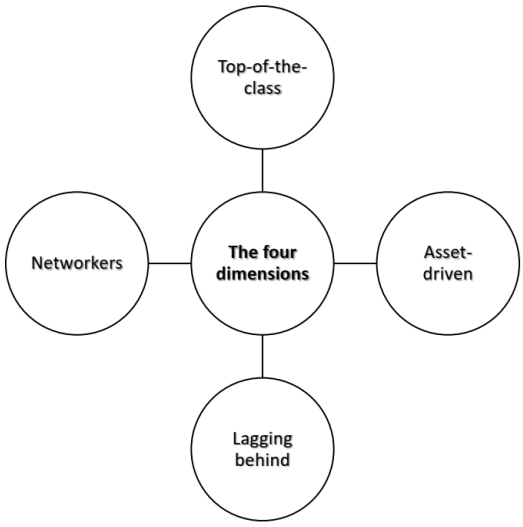

Figure 2: Four Types of Campus Outcome

Moving to the second nuance of sustainability – the idea of continuation without change in the status quo, Fujiwara showed that religious institutions are among the most affected by closures, and that the actual data are occluded due to the changes from 2-year colleges converting into full 4-year programs. She showed that around 16% of universities were founded on religious principles (Christian, Buddhist, Confucian, Shinto, and "new" religions). While 11% of all universities in Japan may be Christian in origin, Fujiwara reports that few of the population are, and that Christian places of worship are below 2.5% of the nation's religious sites (Fujiwara, 2005, p.356).

Davies provides some reasoning as to why there are a range of institutions that do not align with the country's situation as non-Japanese may perceive it, and also why the number of universities might be increasing despite a damaging fall in the number of potential applicants. He describes the religious and philosophical culture as "multilayered, eclectic, and syncretic (i.e., discrete and often contradictory elements are often juxtaposed or harmonized without critical examination or logical unity.)" Davies, 2016, p. 33). He discusses the role of the religion in education (for example, "terakoya" or early education preschools run by Buddhist temples). His model also provides a way of understanding how it is that Japanese see no dissonance in having a Shinto service to mark a birth, a wedding that appears to be Christian, and a Buddhist funeral service (p.122-123).

In this vein, it is not so surprising that support for more university openings occurs despite demographic challenges. Neither is it surprising that local governments attempt to buy up failing

local private universities and convert them into public ones in order to keep young people in the area, in the hope that they will stay there after graduation.

Finally, an example of a "networker" sustainability program is given, along with an invitation to visit and collaborate. The Global Leadership Program (GLP) was set up in 2020 to provide an opportunity for high-achieving students from across the university to work together as a cohort and learn about sustainable development around the world, and to train to work in leadership roles in the future.

In order to enter, prospective students need to have a high GPA, attendance rates, and English proficiency scores. They go through a round of paper screening and then an interview. To date, six cohorts have entered, and the first three have already graduated. In addition to Japanese students, the program has welcomed members from Bangladesh, China, India, Kazakhstan, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The program runs for 4 semesters, from the latter half of 2nd grade, until the mid-point of 4th grade. The first two courses focus on sustainable development, and leadership and soft skill training, During this period, students regularly receive talks from business leaders whose companies are engaged in sustainable practices and also from the UN-Habitat office (United Nations Human Settlements Programme Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific – Fukuoka, n.d.). They also work with representatives from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], n.d.) and are assigned a mentor. This mentor is typically a tenured professor from a different department to the student, and who has significant experience abroad.

In 3rd grade, the students take part in a semester-long program coordinated by Stanford University (Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education [SPICE], n.d.). The SPICE program rotates its content between subjects like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and social entrepreneurship. Members then go abroad either for internships or further language training to complete their 3rd grade activities.

In 4th grade the students work on their ability to apply their GLP learnings to their post-graduation situations with their mentors, and also present in English and Japanese on their GLP results. At the end of this process, two students are selected to participate in a class held at Stanford University's campus in the US. More information about the program can be found on the university's homepage (Kyushu Sangyo University [KSU], n.d.).

To date, students in the three cohorts that have completed the program have generally seen rises in their language proficiency scores and also found work that matches their goals and interests.

D. CONCLUSION

Japanese universities can create and run programs connected to sustainability. Data from Ikegami and Neuts (2020) suggests that it is not the size of the university that matters so much as the willingness to make it happen. In addition, the government is clearly supportive of research in this field, and has enabled projects of various sizes to take place. As to the sustainability of the very large number of universities, it seems likely that changes will have to happen at some point in the future.

A future project might be to look at the differences in sustainability of university assets – specifically, the building standards of public universities seems to be much more sustainable than that of private institutions. Indeed, many private universities are afraid of intervention from the government in terms of mergers or loss of support leading to closure. For this reason, they are constantly putting up new buildings, particularly near the edges of the campus where they can be seen by the public. The image of a "new" campus gives them a sense of security that nobody would wish to force change upon them. This is a kind of sunk-cost fallacy that is perfectly congruent with Davies' "syncretic" idea. This is one case of the two meanings of "sustainability" coming together.

More positively, regional revitalization is a priority in places that are already thinking ahead, and making a go of previously challenging situations. This second case can lead to a win-win scenario: the local region backs the closest university, which in turn provides jobs and

economic vitality to the area. When it begins to teach and research topics like sustainability and regional revitalization, the area benefits from the projects and the know-how of its graduates.

Finally, the Global Leadership Program is just one example of what universities can do, and the institution in question and many others like it in Japan are always happy to partner with universities abroad who wish to reach out and engage.

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